STEVE DITKO AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW LIBERAL IDENTITY

By

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ABSTRACT

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Steve Ditko (1927-2018) is one of the most important contributors to American comic books. As the cocreator of Spider-Man and sole creator of Doctor Strange, Ditko made an indelible mark on American popular culture. *Mysterious Travelers: Steve Ditko and the Search for a New Liberal Identity* resets the conversation about his heady and powerful work. Always inward facing, Ditko's narratives employed superhero and supernatural fantasy in the service of self-examination, and with characters like The Question, Mr. A, and Static, Ditko turned ordinary superhero comics into philosophic treatises. Many of Ditko's philosophy-driven comics show a clear debt to ideas found in Ayn Rand’s Objectivism. Unfortunately, readers often reduce Ditko's work to a mouthpiece for Rand's vision. *Mysterious Travelers* unsettles this notion by theorizing a major strand of liberal thought yet to be explored in academic discourse. Conscripting the popular mind-power and New Thought movements into the rhetoric of libertarianism and later, Reagan-era neoliberalism, Ditko’s work provides access to a “mystic liberalism” that leverages the so-called power of positive thinking for political and philosophic aims. *Mysterious Travelers* also provides a critical reexamination of Ditko’s “right to kill” for fictional characters as well as significant insights into the racial history of Dr. Strange.

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FROM OUT OF THE DEPTHS!

RETHINKING THE WORK OF STEVE DITKO

"Hidden in a cave, beneath the burning sands of New Mexico," a green behemoth in tattered purple pants smashes his fists against blue-gray rock. His head throbbing, he agonizes as the change overcomes his body. He screams out, "I want to remain as I am! I want to be…*The Hulk*!" But no matter how much The Hulk tries to suppress the cooler-headed Bruce Banner, he can't keep Banner inside. The transformation completes and Banner forces The Hulk back inside his mind. A short while later, Banner ponders whether he's capable of perceiving reality any longer, and which of his two identities is his true self. Bruce Banner, or The Hulk? (figure 1.1) Later in the story, Banner has the startling realization that he only becomes The Hulk when he is at his most psychologically strained and vulnerable, "when the pressure becomes unbearable."[1] After this epiphany, The Hulk's story was no longer *just* about blistering action or the youth movement against the establishment, as shown through the conflict between The Hulk and the American military. The story of The Hulk became, in this moment, about a battle within the mind between the rational and the irrational and the power of the mind to manifest itself in physical form. The life of Bruce Banner became about the search for emotional balance and rational control over the sometimes-irrational mind.

Plotted and conceived by Marvel Comics stable artist Steve Ditko, this story appeared in 1964's *Tales to Astonish* #60. It was a watershed moment in the history of the Hulk. Before 1964, The Hulk was a bit of a mess, and there was no clear sense of *why*

Bruce Banner transformed into his raging alter-ego. Sometimes it happened at night; other times, it happened because Banner forced the transformation by blasting himself with gamma rays. The Hulk was created by Jack Kirby, but it was Ditko who refined the character, offering readers what would become one of The Hulk's defining characteristics: he is a manifestation of Banner's psychic state. A preoccupation with one's own interior space and the specter of losing control, *becoming* the darker thoughts and anxieties, was not unique to Ditko's work on The Hulk. The compulsion to explore the mind and the challenge of exorcising its demons is a central theme to the comics Steve Ditko produced over his sixty-five-year career.

Alongside peers like Jack Kirby and Wallace Wood, Steve Ditko helped redefine the superhero genre at Marvel Comics, where Ditko co-created one of the most widely recognizable characters in the world: Spider-Man. At Marvel, Ditko also created Dr. Strange, and along with course corrections on The Hulk, he tweaked characters like Iron Man, designing the red and gold armor that defined the character's aesthetic. At Charlton Comics in the 1960s, Ditko co-created Captain Atom with writer Joe Gill,[2] and, on his own, re-invented the Blue Beetle and created The Question, all characters later purchased by DC Comics and featured prominently throughout the 1980s and beyond. At DC Comics, Ditko created The Creeper, The Hawk and The Dove, Shade the Changing Man, and many of others. These creations barely scratch the surface of Ditko's contributions to the comics medium, but they are characters who have had lasting appeal with readers and have been licensed across other media from cartoons to movies to toys and more.

Yet, for many readers and critics, Steve Ditko is an enigmatic figure whose work presents a difficult challenge. Even a cursory glance at his comics demands that the reader recognize the political nature of popular art, from its conception and creation to its production and distribution. Ditko then takes it a step further, needling his political opponents by insisting that his work needs no justification and is an end in itself. For him, popular art need not make any concessions to its audience or other market pressures. While many focus on—and are troubled by—Ditko's incorporation of Ayn Rand's Objectivism into his work, a closer reading suggests a more complex worldview.[3]

Although the influence of Rand, the Russian-born novelist and self-styled philosopher, is indisputable, Ditko has never claimed (at least in print) to adhere to any one set of political or philosophic ideals. Instead, he appears to merge several different political, philosophical, and popular ideologies of varying coherence into a singular artistic, intellectual voice. Further, his distinct perspective predated and continued beyond any identifiable influence of Objectivism in his work. Ditko never hung out a shingle advertising himself as a philosopher or theorist, but his comics and essays situate him within a tradition of other thinkers who worked out systems for analyzing the world and human relationships through fiction. Although Ditko's work places him within a particular tradition, my aim in this project is not to insist that his work was a touchstone for political action but that it *reflects* an important transition in American thought. Ditko's philosophy is most accessible through his comics, and he typically reserved explicit commentary about his career and philosophy to essays, most of which appeared in small-press and self-published works. The somewhat-limited availability of these texts seems to have encouraged some readers to take it upon themselves to interpolate their imaginations of comics history and Ditko's politics.

In fairness to readers who have made such interpolations, often attempting to read Ditko exclusively through the lens of Objectivism, Ditko did give them some reason to do so. His work visually and rhetorically referenced Objectivist thought. However, when thinking of Ditko characters who *specifically* reference Objectivism, one is limited to the rather infamous cases of The Question and Mr. A. The Question's alter-ego, Vic Sage, has a physical appearance that matches *The Fountainhead*'s Howard Roark, from his gaunt features to his flaming red hair, and speaks in a manner obviously reminiscent of any number of Rand's heroes. Mr. A's name is in reference to the notion of "A is A," a direct application of Rand's interpretation of Aristotle's Law of Identity. Moreover, in Ken Viola's 1987 documentary, *Masters of Comic Book Art*, Ditko provides a voiceover explaining the *philosophy of Mr. A* as being indebted to the thinking of Ayn Rand. So, there is a foundation for limiting Ditko to such readings, but influence and interest in a particular thinker does not necessarily make one a disciple. While never disavowing Rand, Ditko went to some lengths to distance his philosophy from Rand's, never claiming to be an Objectivist. Perhaps another way to think about this is that one might believe in the Golden Rule without being a Christian; or that one might note the undeniable importance and influence of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger while condemning his Nazism. Ditko shouldn't be let off the hook for the elements of Objectivism he embraced. I have attempted to point out many of those links in the following chapters but reducing him to a mouthpiece for Rand does not reflect the whole of his thinking, nor does it help demonstrate how his complicated thinking makes sense of some shifts in contemporary liberal politics.

MISREADING DITKO

To date, academic work examining Ditko's contributions is virtually non-existent, which only appears to intensify common misreadings and misunderstandings about Ditko and his career. What limited critical output exists fixates on Ditko's interest in Objectivism, which, while important, is a smaller part of his overall contributions to the comics medium. In 2008, comics historian Blake Bell, who also edits reprint volumes of Ditko's work for Fantagraphics, released a biography of the artist: *Strange and Stranger*. In that book, Bell attempts to provide a background on Ditko and put his work within a useful historical framework, and it the book succeeds in situating Ditko within a larger historical and cultural context. However, Ditko challenged major claims Bell makes both in the book and in various interviews, such as the, highly plausible, assertion that Ditko left Marvel because of issues related to creator rights and royalties.[4] Although Bell's claims appear to be substantiated by ones made by comics historian Robert Beerbohm in 2012—noting a personal conversation with Ditko in 1969 that Ditko later requested not be made public in Beerbohm's co-publication *Fanzation*[5]—and in 2019 comics writer and historian Mark Evanier claimed to have had a similar conversation with Ditko in 1970.[6] Contra to Bell, Beerbohm, and Evanier, Ditko refuted claims he left the company because of owed royalties and instead points to his working relationship with Marvel editor Stan Lee, which Ditko makes clear in his 2015 essay

"Why I Quit S-M, Marvel."[7] Troublingly, critical discussions around Steve Ditko often regurgitate these kinds of misunderstandings and misinformation, and even a cursory overview of his writing would better inform, if not resolve, most of these issues. Although informative and well-intentioned, Jonathan Ross's 2007 BBC documentary, *In Search of Steve Ditko*, perpetuates many of these easily resolvable misapprehensions and apocryphal stories that have little historical grounding.

This is not to say that Ditko's essays resolve all critiques of his work or his accounting of events, bar critical interventions, or to suggest that authorial intent should be given primacy. When historical misunderstandings and philosophic misapprehensions foreground critical approaches to an author's work, the result, no matter how well-intended, not only perpetuates misinformation but inhibits fellow scholars. Thus, in a case such as Ditko's, rife as it is with misinformation and lore, it is particularly worthwhile to take the author's account—as well as how the author views his contributions to collaborative work—into consideration before drawing critical conclusions regarding that author's philosophy or history.

In the case of Steve Ditko, these issues take the form of relying on unfounded assumptions about his relationship to Objectivism and whether Objectivism is the primary (if not sole) force in what fans and critics believe about Ditko's financial existence,[8] his artistic output, and the fiction of his reclusiveness. My primary concern is that reducing Ditko's work to "Objectivism" becomes a shorthand for both those who seek to discredit Ditko's work and those who claim it as evidence for Objectivism's socio-cultural value. I certainly do not expect such a claim to be taken at face value.

There are several recent examples of this shorthand occurring in comics studies.

Political science scholar Claudia Franziska Brühwiler's "'A Is A': Spider-Man, Ayn Rand, and What Man Ought to Be" presents a brief history of Ditko's relationship with Objectivism, but its underlying premise is that Objectivism is the sole governing force in Ditko's life and that it made him a recluse, the latter of which is an odd claim as it simultaneously assumes a familiarity with Ditko's personal life along with the unusual notion that Objectivist epistemology insists on introversion. Brühwiler, who specializes in studying the work of Rand and libertarianism in literature, presents a view of Ditko that is ultimately dependent on the challenged history in Bell's *Strange and Stranger*. She makes several minor errors regarding the names of Ditko's characters (referring to the alter-ego of Mr. A as "Rex Greiner" instead of Rex Graine), the order of events (she erroneously claims Mr. A was created in 1969), and other small inaccuracies.[9] Although the minutiae are not particularly damning on their own, they diminish her argument in the aggregate. Still, Brühwiler's critiques of Rand are compelling and her mapping of Rand's influence throughout comics history, beyond Ditko, is noteworthy, but neither of these highlights does much to further the conversation around Ditko or his contributions.

"Popular Culture, Ideology, and the Comics Industry: Steve Ditko's Objectivist Spider-Man" by Antonio Pineda and Jesús Jiménez-Varea offers a much more compelling perspective on Ditko's application of Objectivist metaphysics to his run on *The Amazing Spider-Man*. However, it still cites dubious accounts from Stan Lee about the creation of Spider-Man[10] and the hows and whys of the dissolution of the relationship between Lee and Ditko,[11] all of which has been disputed by Ditko, Jack Kirby, and others for some time. Like the Brühwiler article, these problematic historical assertions do not completely undo Pineda and Jiménez-Varea’s critique. They do, unfortunately, demonstrate an uncritical, even if common, approach to historicizing Ditko's comics. Additionally, the article seems to completely ignore the large body of superhero work that Ditko developed after leaving Marvel by implying Ditko resented and had a distaste for superheroes with special powers,[12] a notion that falls apart under any scrutiny.

Setting the problematic historical elements aside, Pineda and Jiménez-Varea cite several instances of how the actions of Peter Parker and plot resolutions are reflective of the kind of heroic ethics demanded by Objectivism and how they lead to the “triumph of the hero.” Convincing as these moments are, the authors’ argument ultimately boils down to reducing Ditko’s work to an exercise in applying Objectivism to superhero comics.[13] It is hard to argue that this is the precise perspective of either of the authors, but by largely neglecting or misreading Ditko's perspective on the development of his heroes and plotlines, the authors perpetuate a popular conception of Ditko's work instead of developing a more critical one.

Journalist and cultural critic Andrew Hultkrans devotes a chapter to Ditko in *Give Our Regards to the Atom Smashers!: Writers on Comics*, edited by Sean Howe. Hultkrans immediately betrays his assumptions about Ditko in the opening to the chapter, continually identifying how “repellant [he] find[s] Ditko’s cultish devotion to the pseudo-philosophy of Ayn Rand.”[14] While maintaining his sharp-edged approach, Hultkrans goes on to develop a sensible historical perspective for Ditko's work, and like the other critics noted here, he makes distinct connections between Ditko's work on Spider-Man and Objectivism. Beyond that, Hultkrans falls in line with others who want to reduce the corpus of Ditko's post-1962 work to a parroting of Ayn Rand. Yet, in his brief consideration of Dr. Strange—the initial creation of whom Ditko had all but complete creative control over—and how the character operates, Hultkrans observes that these narratives are "utterly incompatible with Objectivism."[15]

Depending on one's understanding of Objectivism, the reader may be inclined to agree with Hultkrans on that specific point, but, in the end, he treats what he supposes to be the incompatibility between Dr. Strange and Objectivism as an oddity, rather than giving it serious consideration. Furthermore, Hultkrans neglects other post-Marvel works, like the horror and suspense stories Ditko produced *Eerie*, *Creepy*, and various titles at Charlton Comics, as well as the numerous other comics Ditko released in the decades after his initial stretch at Marvel. All of these employ similar visual and narrative elements to those found in Ditko's Dr. Strange stories. This omission by Hultkrans is problematic as it constitutes a significant portion of Ditko's output in the 1960s and 1970s a period where, according to Hultkrans, Ditko had allegedly been producing "hectoring Objectivist" work.[16] One certainly could not demand that Hultkrans, or anyone else, provide an in-depth analysis of Ditko's oeuvre before drawing useful critical conclusions. However, Hultkrans, like the other historians and critics considered here, has reduced Ditko's work to Objectivist tracts similar to the Christian-fundamentalist screeds and moralizing of a Jack Chick publication. Clear exceptions to that reduction are then treated as abnormalities instead of being reflective of a more complex worldview.

In my scholarship, I, too, have fallen prey to this kind of thinking. "Steve Ditko: Violence and Romanticism in the Silver Age" was my first published academic work, and it discussed thematic and narrative links between Spider-Man and Blue Beetle as well as The Question, Mr. A, and “the right to kill,” a concept that Ditko pioneered in superhero comics in the 1960s. When I wrote the article, I was wrapping up my Master’s degree and was eager to get my scholarship into circulation, but looking back, I over-emphasized the role that Objectivism played in those narratives. As a result, I either neglected to discuss or just missed some of the subtlety that drove the subjects of my article. The Objectivism was right there on the surface, I had a lot of familiarity with Rand’s work, and—not at all to my credit—I jettisoned any prior doubt and accepted the pre-existing narrative about Ditko’s philosophic beliefs. Like the other scholars discussed in this chapter, it’s not that I think lensing Ditko’s work through Rand for that piece was necessarily an invalid means of interpretation; it was, however, a grossly incomplete approach. I have revised and tried to recuperate the basic arguments of that article in chapters four and five. Additionally, I am guilty of overemphasizing Ditko’s intellectual contributions with concepts like “dark karma,” and in my 2017 article for *Inks*, I do not do nearly enough to address the contributions of regular Charlton writer Carl Memling and how his scripts, along with others in the horror and weird genres, lay the groundwork for identifying dark karma as a reflection of popular discourse in American life. I have attempted to correct this significant issue in chapter two.

As it relates to the notion that Objectivism is the singularly defining element of Steve Ditko's work, it is not comics critics alone who have anchored themselves to this point. This approach is also employed by Objectivist scholars and proponents seeking to identify Ayn Rand's cultural impact, presumably demonstrating that her work is seen as merit-worthy in popular media. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* ran such articles in 2003 and 2004. In the first of which, "Replies to Chris Matthew Sciabarra's Fall 2002 article: Fancy Meeting Rand Here," Robert M. Price does not seek to analyze Ditko's work but rather catalog some of Ditko's post-Marvel superheroes and then link them to Rand's Objectivism. An avid comics fan, Price is not a comics scholar by trade, but is a well-known Lovecraft critic and theologian. In 2004's "The Illustrated Rand," Chris Sciabarra links Ditko to Rand as a part of his effort to identify recent references to Rand in academe and popular culture as "nothing less than Rand's cultural ascendancy as an iconic figure."[17] Sciabarra provides a much more in-depth treatment of Ditko than Price, and identifies clear evidence of Rand's influence on Ditko's creative output, going so far as to refer to Ditko as "the gold standard by which to measure Rand's impact."[18] Just as with Hultkrans, Pineda and Jiménez-Varea, and Brühwiler, the connections to Rand that Price and Sciabarra rely on a small number of easily classifiable characters—characters that fit within the journal's particular worldview. Price and Sciabarra are undermining the narrative and philosophic impact of Steve Ditko's output by, again, reducing it to a simple exercise in Objectivist metaphysics.

It's no wonder that Ditko often referred to interpretative approaches to his work as "engaging in fictions and fantasies."

READING DITKO WITH DITKO IN MIND

In saying that we need to take a step back and attempt to check our own personal and political baggage, this inquiry into Ditko's work does not to dismiss those earlier historians and critics. In many ways, the limitations of those earlier readings of Ditko's work have paved the way for positioning Ditko within ongoing philosophic and political conversations and have helped to demonstrate how comic books can facilitate and initiate public philosophic discourse. One of the ways this repositioning of Ditko’s work and philosophy will be approached throughout this book is by considering what Andrei Molotiu—an art historian, comics scholar, and producer of abstract comics—has referred to as the “melodically arranged” sequences and the formal elements of Ditko’s work,[19] interrogating what they reveal about the narratives and ideologies that Ditko presents his readers.

Molotiu considers the rhythms and pacing within the framework of what he has termed “sequential dynamism,” which is the compositional elements “internal to each panel and the layout, that […] propels the reader’s eye […] and that imparts a sense of […] visual rhythms.”[20] Of additional importance is Molotiu’s notion of “iconostasis,” which he defines as “the perception of the layout of a comics pages as a unified composition.”[21] In his analysis of Ditko’s work on *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Molotiu makes a compelling case for the application of his terminology. He further demonstrates that his approach results in a “complex interweaving” of formal, visual elements and “the story’s representational, and even thematic, aspects.”[22] Molotiu’s enlightening approach to the formal elements of Ditko’s output has helped to inform my interpretations and how I situate the comics considered in this study.

Although not at all interested in Steve Ditko, Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden's *How to Read Nancy*—which breaks down *one* of Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy* comic strips into all of its visual-narrative components—also performs some heavy lifting in conceptualizing and interpreting the formal elements of comic book pages. *How to Read Nancy* doesn't claim to put forward any "Grand Unified Theory of Comics," but it does provide a practical insight into comics composition as it contextualizes each of the significant formal elements, revealing the machinations of comics art that allow for the medium to "communicate swiftly and efficiently and with all the working parts laid bare."[23]

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LIBERALISM

By taking into account the visual-philosophic motifs that Ditko has laid bare, and by considering how those formal elements make sense of the representational and thematic elements Ditko explores throughout the whole of his creative and polemical output, this book places Steve Ditko within historical and theoretical conversations about American political discourse and more specifically the emergence of neoliberalism in the twentieth century. My claim throughout this book *is not* that Steve Ditko necessarily influenced political actors through the philosophic explorations presented in his comics and essays. Instead, what I maintain is that in Ditko's work is a reflection of a dynamic shift in the American liberal conscience, rooted in popular philosophic and metaphysical thought. Using Ditko's oeuvre as a *lens* for identifying a major sociopolitical transition that is rooted in an exaltation of the self, one associated with esoteric and occult thought in the interwar and post-World War II period, provides an opportunity to understand how an important segment of American political thought helped buttress neoliberalism and the libertarian movement.

Deeply concerned with issues of interiority and the self, Ditko's work helps demonstrate the rise of such political thought and action in several interesting ways, not the least of which is his particular and selective application of Objectivism. Cultivating his epistemological sense of the world, Ditko's interest in Rand is typically understood as appearing in his work from the 1960s onward, particularly with characters like The Question and Mr. A; however, his commitment to ethical and metaphysical issues predates this period. In brief, what is at stake for comics scholarship in this project is the development of an intellectual history of Steve Ditko, positioning his work and philosophic perspective as a means for understanding some varietals of twentieth-century American political consciousness and the evolution of that consciousness.

In place of conceiving Ditko's politics exclusively through the lens of Objectivism or presuming that such a philosophy and politics first become visible with his superhero work at Marvel in the 1960s, I instead begin with Ditko's entry into the comics industry in 1953. Doing so helps identify and trace a clear philosophic and political outlook that remains consistent throughout his career, and only later picks up Objectivist, neoliberal, and libertarian thought along the way. Doing so reveals, first, that Ditko's work was never fully shackled by Objectivism and, second, that his approach has a much more complicated relationship with mystical thinking than Objectivism would admit.

As such, Ditko's convoluted—but intellectually and ethically consistent—approach allows insight into a strand of American political and religious thought that invites a sense of compatibility amongst conservative and libertarian political values along with religious, often Christian, ones. This kind of thinking, in one sense, may be understood as the "religious right," but in another sense it provides insight into the cultural cache of contemporary mystic thinking like that provided in Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952); or the so-called "prosperity gospel" associated with early practitioners of New Thought like Christian Socialist Wallace Wattles, author of *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910); and with later religious figures such as Joel Osteen; or the success of occultic, New Age books like Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006).

Unquestionably, Ditko would reject and denounce the kind of wish-thinking offered by either Osteen or *The Secret*, but scrutiny of his work reveals an intellectual approach to the self and interiority that aligns with a mind-over-matter, occultic approach to existence similar to those controversial figures. Even more intriguingly, this approach, while easily identifiable in Ditko's work, can also be observed in some of the most prominent individualist thinkers of the mid- and late-twentieth century, particularly in Objectivism, as conceived by Ayn Rand and her one-time intellectual heir, Nathaniel Branden.

For many readers, taking seriously supposedly fringe movements like New Thought, self-help books like those produced by Carnegie and Peale, and thinkers like Rand who regularly cultivated controversy will present a challenge.[24] What this study asks is that intellectual baggage, either for or against those thinkers and movements, be checked at the door. Instead of scrutinizing these ideas for confirmation of an *a priori* political ideal, ask whether significant segments of the public took these ideas seriously and how they were developed and popularized. Beyond this study, consider the broader consequences of these ideas in popular media and American political life. In considering the political landscape after the 2016 presidential election, the lyrics of David Byrne come to mind: "And you may ask yourself, 'Well, how did I get here?'" Even if one takes the view of a more cynical Byrne verse and says, "My God! What have I done?," this is all the more reason to interrogate these thinkers and ideas to form a more complete understanding of late-twentieth-century thought.

Moreover, recognizing the historical and cultural significance of political figures like former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan—who presided from the Reagan administration until 2006—demands an understanding of Rand, for whom Greenspan provided essays that appeared in books like *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1966). Acknowledging the importance of Ronald Reagan brings with it the baggage of Reagan's interest in mystic thought, and his quoting of New Thought occultist Manly P. Hall in speeches and essays.[25] The intrigue surrounding the presidency of Donald Trump has made more explicit Trump's application of Norman Vincent Peale as being central to how he carries himself.[26] These ideas, however seemingly fringe, have had a significant impact on American political life, and ignoring or dismissing them does not strike me as a viable option.

To be clear, Ditko never explicitly associated himself with any one political figure, party, or singular idea. Rather, while acknowledging his intellectual debt to Rand, Ditko always presented his ideas and philosophy as his own: over time, he mixed and collected what he thought were the best ideas about the self, ethics, and philosophy and distilled them into worldview that underwrote his interaction with the world. He believed that this was true for most people. In a 2016 essay appearing at the back of *Out of This World*, a compilation of new and reproduced Ditko stories, he wrote, "*Everyone* acts on *his philosophy* however well-known or understood." In that same essay, he addresses critics who have negatively linked him to Rand, defensively suggesting that those critics are out of their depth, having likely never read Rand. But before that, he's careful to place distance between himself and Objectivism, and lashes out at critics

> who choose to remain *philosophically dumb* and *act* as *philosophically enlightened* continue to express *their incompetence* with their *linking* their *anti-Ditko story* and *art* and *A. Rand's Objectivism* philosophy.
>
> Yet, few CBFs [Comic Book Fans] have *actually read* the articles I have written and the comic books I have written, drawn and *published.*[27]

This issue is an important one for Ditko. Setting aside the clear frustration with those who he seems to think are misreading him (if they're reading him at all), the takeaway here is that Ditko insists there is not a one-to-one correspondence between his comics and Objectivist thought. Further, that he is engaging in some other kind of thought, not tethered to Objectivism, has been made clear by the artist in his comics and essays.

A reader of history and philosophy, Ditko constructed his worldview, borrowing from a variety of thinkers and ideologies where he saw fit. Linking him to the ideological construct identified in this study is not intended to pigeonhole the artist, but rather demonstrates how Ditko's work reflects a broad, consequential popular ideology. Put differently, the purpose of this book is not to obliterate the popular approach of reading Ditko ideologically, but rather to recalibrate the conversation to consider Ditko's work as presenting a more nuanced view of the world and the mind than previous criticism has allowed. In recovering Ditko's lesser-read and discussed works, or even introducing them to new readers, this study achieves those ends.

Ditko's approach to philosophy represents a sort of religion-after-religion that is focused on the self and the power of volition in determining one's worth to one's self and, thereby, to society at large. Although Ditko rejected any association with mysticism as a serious worldview,[28] his work provides insight into a kind of *mystic liberalism* that emerges in the mid-twentieth century. A corollary to neoliberalism, which represents a resurgence of nineteenth-century economic thought and *laissez-faire* capitalism, mystic liberalism merges neoliberal ideals with a revival of nineteenth-century occult and mystic thought as it relates to the formation of the individual.

Merging various applications of liberalism and mysticism results in a kind of thinking where the individual human imagination can now discern the machinations of the cosmos and harness its powers. In other words, through such discernment, the individual makes an object of the cosmos. To be clear, this is not the same as Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, a nineteenth-century esoteric philosophy, which also insists that there exists an objective spiritual world that is graspable through independent, disciplined, rational inquiry and individual experience. In Steiner's Anthroposophy, the spiritual world exists as a separate plane that evolves along with the earthly one. In mystic liberalism, the cosmos that must be explored and made object exists not without but within. Thus, through an apparently rational, reasoned exploration, the individual extrapolates from the cosmos an unambiguous, universal ethical code of conduct. In place of attempting to reach and interact with another plane of existence, the mystic liberal is seeking control over and the improvement of their present one. Mystic liberalism is a kind of occult scientism whereby a sense of ultimate truth and knowledge is not gifted by an ethereal authority, but rather it is a secret revealed and earned inside each unique human conscience.

MYSTIC LIBERALISM’S METAPHYSICAL COSMOLOGY

Ditko’s mystic liberalism offers two distinct cosmological precepts that undergird his philosophy: dark karma and cosmic intraspace. Respectively, these precepts function to demonstrate how rational justice should be meted out and how individuals may reach a point of self-actualization by plumbing the depths of their consciences and exorcising the demons within. Visually, these concepts appear immediately in Ditko’s work in the 1950s (chapter two), and are especially prevalent in his horror, weird, and suspense stories. These concepts—particularly cosmic intraspace—are not limited to these narrative modes. They also appear in superhero comics with characters like Dr. Strange in the early 1960s (chapter three) and are rearticulated with street-level, hardboiled heroes like Mr. A (chapter five) and later creations like Static in the 1970s and 1980s (chapter six). Again, what’s at stake in identifying Ditko’s mystic liberalism and its precepts is not so much ascribing some kind of intentionality to Ditko's intellectual-artistic approach but rather using Ditko's work as a lens for understanding what would become a powerful segment of American life and thought from the mid-twentieth century onward.

More precisely, what mystic liberalism offers is a new way of conceiving the intellectual and ethical framework that many libertarians and members of the American right of the twentieth century depend upon to produce and reproduce "individuals." Additionally, whereas neoliberalism works to satisfy questions about *inter*personal, economic political activity, mystic liberalism interests itself in *intra*personal political activity. The entanglement of mystic thought and liberalism is perhaps most compellingly observed by Max Stirner in *The Ego and His Own* (1845), but the expansion of that network to include the occult and individualism appears to be a more specific product of the twentieth century and is immediately recognizable in popular art and discourse. Defining and identifying mystic liberalism is a means for recanalizing how we interpret art and media of the mid-twentieth century.

Steve Ditko's creative and polemical output offers an insight into this concept that—because it's simultaneously philosophical, literary, and visual—provides a clear sense of how to construct a practical understanding of mystic liberalism and how to identify and draw critical conclusions about its effects as it appears across media. Although a more complete realization of mystic liberalism and its applications in the ongoing conversations about the role of liberalism in American literature and culture will appear in the first chapter of this book, it's worth at least briefly developing here a sense of how its two major tenets of dark karma and cosmic intraspace can be observed as visual and narrative motifs in Ditko's aesthetic.

When conceptualizing something like dark karma, it should be noted that Ditko is not alone in the mid-twentieth century in (mis)appropriating the Hindu and Buddhist conception of karma, so much so that, in the popular American lexicon, it's become a shorthand for receiving one's comeuppance, good or bad. In many cases, the word "karma" has lost any substantial meaning at all. In *Karma Cola* (1979), documentarian and author Gita Mehta notes, "As options proliferate all over the globe [for karma], the ability to understand the nature of necessity appears to be diminishing and bondage means something else again. So the terminology has accommodated itself to the needs of those who use it."[29] Mehta is writing in the context of the so-called New Age movement of the 1960s and beyond, but this appropriation of Eastern religious and mystic thought by the West runs deeper than the Beatles hanging out with Ravi Shankar and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Occult historian Mitch Horowitz asserts in *Occult America* (2009) that, on account of the formation of the Theosophical Society in 1875 and its later efforts, co-founders Henry Steel Olcott and his partner H.P. Blavatsky became "the single most significant Western figure[s] in the modern religious history of the East,"[30] certainly where the introduction of karma into Western discourse is concerned. Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Horowitz shows, "popularized the word *occultism* and made the concept a matter of passionate interest among artists, authors, and spiritual seekers of the Western world."[31] Blavatsky writes about karma in many of her works, and in *Isis Unveiled* she first describes it as "the power which controls the universe, prompting it to activity, merit and demerit."[32] Blavatsky then points to karma as working conjointly with one's "mental state" as being the cause of individual, personal conditions, suggesting that if one is miserable or content, that it is of one's own doing. Further, one may gain contentment by doing such things as unifying the mind and body into a single self through greater contemplation.[33] In later works, like *The Key to Theosophy*, Blavatsky expands her sense of karma as being merciless, going so far as to suggest that there can be no ultimate forgiveness from God and that karma works as the means for punishing misdeeds, thus setting the universe aright.[34]

Although Ditko never makes any explicit written reference to it, a Blavatskian sense of karma is still useful in making sense of how a concept like justice operates in the Ditkovian imaginary. Ditko offers his sense of karma in 1973's *Mr. A* #1; in his configuration, karma relies on two basic principles: it is merciless toward evil and it may only be understood by its observable effects. For Ditko, "evil" is a choice to "act against [one's] own life" by rejecting "good," and justice is not a restoration of the victim but rather a punishment of the victimizer—there is no mercy and "no escape for would-be destroyers of any good."[35] To this latter point, a dark karmic justice may be a supernatural occurrence, it may appear to be a mere coincidence or accident, or it may be the *fictional* hero deliberately ending the life of a criminal. This last instance is where Ditko develops his most philosophically complete concept: "the right to kill," which depends upon the assumption that "any man who claims the right to another's efforts or life automatically renounces the concept of rights and their protection of his right to his own legitimate efforts and life."[36] Put differently, the right to live and possess property is dependent upon one's continued adherence to a set of ethical principles which bar individuals from imposing their will upon others. To make this plain for readers, Ditko uses the death and/or killing of characters who violate those principles. Chapter five offers a detailed exploration of the complexities of "the right to kill" as a concept.

DEPLOYING MYSTIC LIBERALISM

Ditko's "right to kill," in an exceedingly superficial sense, is a challenge to cultural expectations and the editorial practices many publishers adopted during the build-up to and in the wake of the formation of the Comics Code Authority. The Code, introduced in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association of America, was a set of self-censorship guidelines developed under the auspices of protecting the comics industry from government censorship. Through adherence to the Code was voluntary, a failure to meet the Code's demands meant a loss of distribution outlets, jeopardizing publishers' ability to sell comics at all.

Although lethal violence was not specifically prohibited by the Code, "scenes of excessive violence," along with "brutal torture [and] excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay" were. Moreover, major publishers, like DC Comics, had in-house guidelines that prohibited superheroes from deliberately taking human life.[37] In other words, the circumstances were such that Ditko would not, and likely could not, have fully realized his narratives as he would have seen fit, and his interest in reintroducing explicit, lethal violence to superhero comics is indicative of the intellectual approach he had been providing readers all along. Specifically articulated in the issue of *Mr. A* discussed above, “the right to kill” was previously employed by The Question in 1967’s *Blue Beetle* #4. In a back-up feature to that issue, The Question ends the lives of two criminals by kicking them into a sewer to drown.

The Question’s actions were a direct violation of the Comics Code, and while adherence to the Comics Code hamstrung the killings Ditko portrayed in *Blue Beetle* #4, the meaning was made clear to readers through Ditko’s visuals. Further, in later essays like “…The Right to Kill!” and comic strips like “Social Justice,” Ditko directly responds to the kind of cultural criticism that resulted in the Code. However, for Ditko, neither of these instances are singular products of the Code; rather, they are representative of the philosophic, intellectual approach that Ditko brought to his work. The Code simply provided the target for his pre-existing notions. In other words, “the right to kill” always existed in his comics; responding to the Code was the opportunity to fully articulate that “right.” The employment of the “right to kill” is first defended by instances of dark karma, and, later, individual human agents gain access to the “right” by learning about this dark karmic order through an exploration of cosmic intraspace.

Just as there is a right to kill, the right to live is inherent in the Ditkovian and mystic liberal imaginary, but individual personhood is not guaranteed. One might exist, in other words, as a formless mass of flesh with a mind made of mush—a scenario that is realized both literally and figuratively in Ditko’s work. In the literal sense, the Mindless Ones, a teeming horde of shapeless, humanoid lumps, inhabit the outer reaches of Dormammu’s Dark Dimension in *Doctor Strange*, constantly threatening the ordered—albeit evil—domain under Dormammu’s control. More often, however, these characters appear in the figurative sense, and often as the victims of dark karma. Among many others, a specific example of this occurs in the story "Deep Ruby!," which first appeared in *Eerie* #6 from 1966 and was a collaboration between Ditko and writer/editor Archie Goodwin.

A seemingly straightforward supernatural horror story in the vein of pre-Code horror comics or *The Twilight Zone*, "Deep Ruby!" tells the story of jeweler Lester Darrow and how he came to be in a physically and mentally shambolic state—"a leering, lurching example of how low humanity could sink."[38] Although Lester cannot account for how much time has passed since his life changed so dramatically, he can recall how this apparent transformation took place. One night, Lester is approached by a revolting, back-alley degenerate who shows him a strange-looking red gem, the likes of which the jeweler has never seen before. While looking upon the gem, Lester is consumed with an irrational lust for the object. As he stares ever more deeply into the gem, his greed increases, and by unknown means, Lester is transported and trapped inside of the object.

Once within the gem, Lester tumbles through a Dalí-esque, nightmarish landscape—reminiscent of those traversed by Dr. Strange—where he is attacked and carried off by demonic-looking figures who attempt to feed Lester to a giant, disembodied, fang-toothed mouth. (figure 1.2) When Lester pleads for the demons to explain why this is happening to him, one responds that the color of the gem is created by human blood and that Lester is to be the next sacrifice that would sustain the gem's color. At this moment, Lester miraculously breaks free of the demons' grasp and makes a run for it, only to find that he is still trapped within the gem. Speaking through the barrier of the gem to the man who had tempted and trapped him there, Lester agrees to pay any price, just so long as he can be free. The man agrees, but in typical O. Henry fashion, after Lester is freed, it is he who is now doomed to take up the role of the back-alley degenerate. Lester is then left haunting alleyways, searching for someone else to tempt and trap within the gem so that he might be free again.

What a story like “Deep Ruby!” presents, in Ditko’s mystic liberalism, is an instance of a living human being failing to actualize as a complete, productive, individual. Encountering a challenge to his ethics and his sense of rationality, Lester is plunged into a cosmic intraspace—a symbolic, interior realm where he must face the demons that would tempt him away from individual personhood and, thus, a dignified existence. Failing to deny his impulsive greed and accepting the gem from the derelict, Lester is reduced to the same driveling, shambolic state as the man he took the gem from, rendering him a grotesque, subhuman figure. Lester forfeits his mind to whims and thereby forfeits his personhood. This seems plain enough from the change in Lester’s figure between the opening and final panels of the story, but the inclusion of the cosmic intraspace inside the gem adds an important symbolic layer. Within the infinite interior of the gem, the reader gets a glimpse of Lester’s mind—the place where he must overcome his irrational impulses.

The tangled passageways that Lester plummets through and the demons he encounters stand in for the challenges one must face and overcome on the road to rationality and individual actualization. Because Lester cannot ward off the demons of greed and steer his way clear, he is left to beg the derelict holding the gem for help. This begging for help from others only deepens Lester's problems because, at this point, he's surrendered more than his mind to irrationality; he's surrendered his agency to another. In Ditko's work, cosmic intraspaces function as areas where his characters are forced to plumb the depths of their psyches, facing their impulses and shortcomings, where they must *choose* to fight and exorcise those demons or succumb to them. The consequence for relenting to the ghosts and demons that haunt individual minds is nothing less than a rejection of life.

Many of Ditko's horror and weird suspense stories adopt a similar narrative structure; however, not all of his explorations of cosmic intraspace end as bleakly as "Deep Ruby!" The story "From Out of the Depths," which was first printed in *This Magazine is Haunted* #14 in 1957[39] is one such case where engaging with cosmic intraspace and its denizens results in triumph and hope. Narrated by the series's horror host, Dr. Haunt Wonder, "From Out of the Depths" is the story of Juan, a "Mexican peon," who owns "a dried up sandy waste that was once black fertile earth" along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.[40] At the outset, Juan, his family, and his farm are in dire straits; meanwhile, unbeknownst to Juan , there is a shapeless creature whose appearance is "so different from anything we know that it is beyond comprehension" lurking outside his door. Significantly, the creature has emerged from the darkened depths of the Gulf and is creeping its way towards Juan's home. Meanwhile, Juan sits at his table contemplating what to do about his failing farm so that he can save himself and his family; as Dr. Wonder assures the reader, Juan is a man plagued with worry.

As the reader learns of Juan's troubled thoughts and fears from the narrator, Juan looks out his window, hoping for a sign of rain, noting "how helpless man is against nature." Juan is wishing for a better life without taking personal action, either literally or within his conscious mind. However, when he sees the creature from the depths shambling towards his home, Juan moves to defend his property and his life against this threat from inside the Gulf. In a rather obvious manner, the creature represents all of Juan's internal struggles: his worry about the survival of his family, his frustration with nature. Making this even more obvious in the narrative is that, as he steps outside and encounters the creature, he resists his fears and worries and attacks the unknown thing, seeing it as an "alien…symbol of all his troubles, something tangible he can strike back at."[41] As soon as he overcomes his fear and strikes the shapeless monster, it immediately dissolves, dissipating into the sky where it forms clouds and rains on Juan's once barren farmland. (figure 1.3)

In a superficial sense, "From Out of the Depths" might convincingly be reduced to a tale of man's ability to overcome and dominate nature for his survival. In another sense, it is not nature that Juan overcomes, but rather, his fears, worries, and self-doubt. Like Juan's troubles, the creature emerges from an internal space, and that it has any recognizable features at all, Dr. Wonder insists, is a product of our "imagination that causes [us] to see things that are not there."[42] When Juan tangles with the creature, it makes a "soundless shriek"[43] that only Juan can hear, causing him to cringe and recoil in fear. Further, that the creature evaporates into mist once Juan demonstrates the courage and fortitude to stand up to his fears is even more telling: it is not the external world or nature that poses the greatest threat to Juan and his family—it's his fears from the depths of his psyche, which have manifested themselves as the amoeba-like creature from the depths of the Gulf.

Wishing his troubles and fears away and blaming the uncontrollable forces of nature only heaped more misery on Juan; only when he took individual action was he able to triumph. Unlike Lester Darrow who is dominated by his greed and lust for the unearned in "Deep Ruby!," Juan is able to master his shortcomings and earn the opportunity for a productive life. Regardless of the outcome in each story, what Ditko's cosmic intraspace presents to his characters is an opportunity to take control of their existence by mastering the space within themselves through a sense of rationality. This kind of exercise runs parallel with the mystic notion of Blavatsky and others that experiencing success and contentment in one's life is achieved by the unifying the mind and body through contemplation. Failure to achieve success and contentment, therefore, is a failure of contemplation and the inability to master one's own interior spaces.

Mystic liberalism and its corollaries to the work of Steve Ditko, as it applies to the two stories above, acts as more than a specific reading of the artist's work. Because Ditko is working in the popular culture industry and is reaching audiences at a mass—even global—scale and did so for nearly seventy years, it is worth considering how these concepts apply broadly to American culture, especially at the time when Ditko was at his most productive from 1953 to the early 1980s. If mystic liberalism helps to understand the intellectual and artistic trajectory of Ditko's work, we might then be able to use Ditko's work as a lens for understanding how this unique political outlook developed and was challenged in the American political consciousness of the same period. Although such a consideration has broad implications across popular media and political thought, *Mysterious Travelers* will focus specifically on comics and the dialogue that occurs within the medium's narrative history as it debates Ditko's worldview and its potential consequences.

Comics are useful in an exploration of how a creator's philosophy impacted American culture and politics precisely because comics is a medium that, through the means of its production and distribution, has been able to reach mass audiences in ways relatively inaccessible to the works of great philosophers, economists, and political theorists of the same period or before. With a few notable exceptions, comics were not produced by trained philosophers and academics, and, largely, they have carried on their political conversations away from the intellectual and political elite. But that has never rendered comics impotent in political discourse.

Embracing their platform, comics became a vehicle for decrying societal ills, like racism and anti-Semitism, as in the comics produced by EC in the 1950s; they were a means for Jack Kirby to air his grievances about the working conditions of the comic book artist, specifically working for Stan Lee at Marvel through characters like Funky Flashman in *Mister Miracle*; comics were a site of the counterculture and anti-war movement of the 1960s through comics like *Blazing Combat* and the underground works of Spain Rodriguez, Gilbert Shelton, and Robert Crumb; comics were a means for the cosmopolitan culture of the early Los Angeles punk scene to be considered in the

Hernandez brothers' *Love and Rockets*; comics were the medium Steve Ditko used to offer readers a philosophic—often didactic—alternative to the counterculture; and comics were the means by which Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons responded to Ditko's worldview in *Watchmen.* That comics have always been political is obvious but recognizing the level of political engagement they are involved in is important for conceptualizing how mass markets were exposed to political and philosophic ideas and debates. Although the examples above are limited and brief, they do demonstrate a history of comics persistently engaging with—and unabashedly attempting to persuade—their audiences about political and social issues. Many, if not most, of those readers were children and adolescents still developing their understanding of how to navigate the world around them. Like many readers of this book, I was one such child and adolescent.

ENGAGING WITH DITKO

I can't quite recall how I was first exposed to superhero comic books, but the first comic I remember owning was *Batman* #402 from 1986. My parents would have bought it for me off a grocery store spinner rack, and I remember stowing it with my other book and record sets—which featured characters like He-Man, The Superfriends, and Spider-Man. The cover of that issue of *Batman* featured the titular character choking another person dressed as Batman. Right there on the cover! Batman choking another Batman! And in big, bold text: "There's nothing so savage—as a man destroying himself!" Without intentionally overstating it, I had something of an existential crisis. My worldview was completely rattled, and my four-year-old brain ran wild with the concept presented on this cover. “How could Batman fight *Batman*?!,” I wondered from my bedroom floor, and for what seemed like hours, I stared at that cover, marveling at the possibilities. How could a man, much less a *batman*, fight himself? Little did I know that Steve Ditko had long been grappling with strikingly similar issues in the decades before this issue. From that moment forward, I was hooked, and my parents’ and grandparents’ acquiescence to my habit allowed access to not just to comics but to my sense of self as well.

It was in 1992, the thirtieth anniversary of the creation of Spider-Man, that I first recall encountering Steve Ditko’s work. In the early 1990s, Marvel launched a series that was in the vein of their *Masterworks* line of collected editions called *Marvel Milestone Editions*, single issues that reprinted some of the company’s most famous and important comics. It was a great place for a burgeoning collector to get a taste of the kinds of comics that came before. They even featured a silver border around the cover to match the *Marvel Masterworks* line, priming consumers to follow up with those more expensive collected editions. It also had the effect of more formally introducing the likes of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko to young readers. It was here where I first encountered Ditko in reprints of *Amazing Fantasy* #15 and *Amazing Spider-Man* #1. I had never seen anything like them before and they captivated me.

The way Ditko’s characters contorted and moved, his focus on the hands as a means of human expression, the way his characters emoted and created drama on the page, the way his layouts dictated the tone and pace of the narrative, along with any number of other idiosyncratic elements were things that I obsessed over for years, decades. When I first read *Amazing Spider-Man* #33 as a kid, I was moved to tears because it was the first time I felt like I *understood* Peter Parker—that his heroism was not defined by his superpowers or costume but by his heart and mind. This was a profound revelation for my young mind, and, as I would realize much later, a product of Ditko's particular psychological approach to characters.

As I grew older, I gained access to something I imagined to be disposable income as well as the ability to travel to far-away comic-book conventions, and I began to pursue Ditko's work wherever I could find and afford it. After my childhood investments in Spider-Man, Dr. Strange, and Speedball, I found Ditko's Charlton and DC superheroes, like Blue Beetle, Captain Atom, The Question, The Hawk and The Dove, and weird heroes like The Creeper and Shade the Changing Man. At first, I bought those issues solely because of Ditko's name, but when I read them, I found myself perplexed by their contents—especially with characters like The Question and Hawk and Dove because of their obvious political and philosophic investments. I didn't quite have the vocabulary to articulate it at the time, but through those works, I first understood that comics had political and rhetorical aims for their readers. From there, I began to indulge myself with Ditko's horror and science fiction titles, as well as his later contribution to titles like *ROM*, brief stints on *Chuck Norris and The Karate Commandos*, and short-lived series like *The Destructor*. Around the same time, I was digging through back-issue boxes looking for those titles, I came across characters like Static and eventually found a copy of *Mr. A* #1, which I snatched up for the paltry sum of nine dollars. As I read through these comics, it wasn't just Ditko's philosophy and politics that I confronted; I began to realize how his thinking manifested on the page *visually* through his layouts and how he rendered the contents of each panel.

By this time, I had long known about the conflicts between Ditko and Stan Lee, outlined above, as well as the conflicts that Jack Kirby had with Lee, so encountering a page where Ditko's art didn't quite match the dialogue that was edited and/or supplied after his pages were complete wasn't a great shock to me. But in 1975's *The Destructor* #4, dialogued by Gerry Conway and edited by Larry Lieber, I became most keenly aware of how Ditko's politics appeared visually and were uncompromised enough to disrupt the flow of the narrative.

In that issue, Jay Hunter, the series's protagonist, has been captured by a group of unusual-looking people with superpowers living in a hidden, underground city called the Secret Citadel. The leader of the group, Kronus, explains to Hunter how the city came to be and how its citizens were grotesquely mutated and given superhuman abilities. As a part of his tale, Kronus tells of how his parents confronted the multimillionaire who financed the building of the Secret Citadel, Abraham Caldwell, a man that Kronus describes as "*evil incarnate*."[44] (figure 1.4) Kronus explains that Caldwell built a shoddy nuclear power plant to fuel the city, and because of his negligence, the power plant failed catastrophically, mutating the generation of children born in the Secret Citadel. Enraged by what has happened, Kronus's parents, who are academics, confronted and beat Caldwell to death before surrendering to the authorities. That's the story as Kronus tells it and as Conway scripts it. Ditko's art tells a very different story.

Instead of a dystopian setting, the Secret Citadel is a highly sophisticated, futuristic-looking city, complete with flying cars and Kirby-esque machines. It's clean, sleek-looking, and functioning. Abraham Caldwell has an erect posture, and, in spite of the words written for him by Conway, along with their particular points of emphasis, Caldwell has a calm, rational, and polished demeanor. Caldwell is clearly a man in control of himself, and depending on one's perspective, the millionaire industrialist even appears heroic. Meanwhile, Kronus's parents and their academic friends are rendered as slouching, overwrought, and overweight grotesques, wracked with emotion and anger at the "evil" Caldwell, and their attack on Caldwell and his aides is depicted as frenzied, irrational, and disheveled. While Conway's dialogue makes the attack sound, at worst, born of righteous anger, Ditko's art shows the attack to be the product of an irrational mob mentality, born of a hatred of what Ayn Rand imagined to be "men of the mind."

In February 2018, via Twitter, I asked Gerry Conway whether or not he had any recollection of this collaboration and the stark differences between his script and Ditko's finished art. He responded briefly, writing, "Probably. Ditko is an Ayn Rand absolutist. I'm a squishy libtard." Setting aside the political commentary, Conway says he liked working with Ditko, and it seems clear that Ditko going off in his own direction with the visual elements of the narrative doesn't come as a surprise to Conway. That Conway has an air of expectation about the changes made in *The Destructor* speaks directly to Ditko's steadfastness in making his ideals a part of his work. Further, in a later tweet in the same conversation, Conway added that, when he worked with Ditko,

Ditko worked from full scripts, but that the two of them only ever met in person once. That Ditko was working from full scripts from Conway but still decided to tell a different story than the script, again, reinforces the primary importance of reading the formal elements of any of Ditko's work—be it a collaborative or more singular effort—when teasing out an ideological message.

Atlas Comics, the publisher of *The Destructor*, folded after this issue was released, and the final installments of the story were never printed, so it's difficult to speculate on how things shook out for Jay Hunter, Kronus, and the dwellers of the Secret Citadel. However, a potential reading of this issue is that Kronus is an unreliable source of information, and later in the issue Kronus does prove himself to be of complicated motivations, if not villainous. Even so, if one chooses to read Kronus as complex and/or unreliable, this doesn't cancel out the visual depictions of the Secret Citadel's financier, the mob that murdered him, or the political implications of those depictions. Abraham Caldwell hardly falls in line with the grotesque features of Ditko's other villains, whereas Kronus's parents fit the physical depiction of any number of Ditko villains, from their posture to their twisted faces and wide, bulging eyes. Whether it was a decision from Ditko or Conway to contravene the other is less important than the fact that Ditko's politics are presented visually. From this point, as well as nearly countless others, we can extrapolate a way to interpret Ditko's visual rhetoric and place it within the context of a larger political philosophy. It is that larger political philosophy that is explored here as a means for positioning Ditko's work as an entry point for broader cultural and theoretical conversation.

Whatever the outcome of a book like *The Destructor* is, and whatever way it is received and interpreted, Ditko was right about at least one thing: all lives do change. The following chapters are intended to demonstrate how—tucked away in a Manhattan office building, behind a heavy metal door in an austere-looking, narrow hallway—the work of a particular creative voice provides insight into one of the myriad ways American political life changed during the twentieth century. Beginning with Ditko's earliest horror and suspense stories, moving into his superhero comics of the 1960s and 1970s, transitioning into his creator-owned work of 1960s into the 1980s, this book explores the development of Ditko's political philosophy, how it can be conceived through mystic liberalism, some of the broader implications of Ditko's philosophy, and how other politically active voices in comics responded to such a worldview. Tracking this intellectual history will help us gain a better understanding of an unusual, but powerful, strand of the American political consciousness that develops alongside the neoliberalism of the mid-twentieth century and how that peculiar strand of mystic liberalism informed popular discourse and popular media for decades to come.

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[1] Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, "The Incredible Hulk!," comic strip, *Tales to Astonish, no. 60*, October 1964.

[2] I refer to Captain Atom as an original co-creation here because it is not clear that he is a revised version of the Captain Atom who appeared at Australia's Atlas Publishing from 1948-1954 or the Captain Atom who appeared at publishing house Nation-wide from 1950-1951. However, I do concede that the number of characters with the same name over such a short span of time is curious, if not understandable. The Australian publisher, Atlas, has no known connection to American comics publisher Martin Goodman's Atlas Comics line, although both were active during the same period. The Australian Atlas should also not be confused with the revived American Atlas Comics line of the 1970s, where Ditko worked on comics like *The Destructor*, but I digress. If there is a direct antecedent for Joe Gill and Steve Ditko's Captain Atom, a sensible choice might be Spark Comics's Atoman, who first appeared in 1946. Atoman was co-created by Jerry Robinson and Mort Meskin; Ditko studied under Robinson and also worked with and greatly admired Mort Meskin. The original design of the Gill and Ditko Captain Atom is an unmistakable nod to Meskin and Robinson's much earlier Atoman.

[3] In his dissertation project *Four-Color Political Visions*, political scientist Joshua Plencner, comments that totalizing views of Ditko's work as being reflective of his politics—still accepting and identifying those politics as Objectivist—is problematic as it imagines "the comic book page as a transposition of artist

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ideology rather than as a vector of relation," arguing that comic art shouldn't be regarded as a "predictable mechanism of meaning-making" as opposed to a component of "an emergent social process." I agree with Plencner insofar as the politics of a piece of comic art do not end with the last bits of ink placed on a page and that they are instead implicated in a social process of meaning-making. Indeed, this book is largely predicated on a similar line of reasoning: a body of work has a politics and those politics have a complicated relationship with a variety of publics and counterpublics. However, the notion that Ditko's comics can or should be entirely untethered from his politics and philosophy is an equally problematic way of considering the work of an artist who, as is discussed throughout this book, endeavors to link his own philosophy—which he treats as largely unique to himself—to the comics he produced throughout his career. This is particularly the case for not just his independent work but the corporate comics that featured characters he wrote, like *Shade: The Changing Man*, Dr. Strange, Spider-Man, *The Hawk and The Dove*, et. al. So, it's both: Ditko's work must be treated as both a reliable vessel for Ditko's ideology that is also a part of a complex network of cultural conversations.
"Four-Color Political Visions: Origin, Affect, and Assemblage in American Superhero Comic Books" (unpublished manuscript, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, January 14, 2015), 89-90 n. 105, accessed March 7, 2019, https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/18748.

[4] Blake Bell, *Strange and Stranger: The World of Steve Ditko* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2008), p. 95.

[5] Robert Beerbohm, "Goodman vs Ditko & Kirby," *The Kirby Museum* (blog), entry posted February 11, 2012, https://kirbymuseum.org/blogs/dynamics/2012/02/11/goodman-vs-ditko-kirby-by-robert-beerbohm/.

[6] Mark Evanier, "And Ditko said the same thing to me in 1970 that he said to Bob Beerbohm.," Facebook, September 9, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/stephen.bissette.7/posts/10159059148538289.

[7] Steve Ditko, "Why I Quit S-M, Marvel," *The Four Page Series, no. 9*, September 2015. It is also worth noting that comics writer and historian Mark Evanier has claimed that, based on person conversations with Ditko in 1970, that there may have been more to the situation than Ditko lets on in his 2015 essay. Responding to a Facebook discussion started by a post from comics artist Stephen Bissette, Evanier believes that Ditko thought "Marvel would come after him and give him everything he wanted" Evanier's claim is plausible and merits some historical consideration. Evanier is also very clear to point out that Ditko *never* specifically said this but it was the impression Evanier received from the conversation. Evanier also claims that Jack Kirby and Marvel office manager Sol Brodsky had similar impressions. Speculative as it is, I take Evanier's impression to be an honest one is worth noting at least because of the complications it presents to thinking about Ditko's working relationship to Marvel and a potential desire for more favorable terms as the company moved to license many of its characters, including Spider-Man. However, Ditko never publicly substantiated such an assertion, and if true, it would seem to be a significant omission from his several essays about his history at Marvel. The claim has also not yet been substantiated by other sources close to Ditko in the immediate days and years following his departure from Marvel. Mark Evanier, "This is an interesting discussion and I'm too busy today to plunge into it but let me throw in a fact that some folks have missed...," Facebook, September 8, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/stephen.bissette.7/posts/10159059148538289.

[8] While this is a common perception, in a 2015 Twitter micro-essay, Jeet Heer, without substantive support, claimed "Randian pseudo-logic" will cost Steve Ditko "$50 to $100 million." In fairness to Heer, he does rightly acknowledge the role that Ditko had in the creation and development of characters like Spider-Man, but like many of the other scholars discussed in this book, Heer defaults to Objectivism as a shorthand to explain apparent perplexities about Ditko's actions and output. Moreover, he refers to Ditko's post-Marvel work as being split between "commercial hack work" and "Randian tracts," again neglecting of some of Ditko's most significant contributions in favor of a reductive shorthand.

[9] Claudia Franziska Brühwiler, "'A Is A': Spider-Man, Ayn Rand, And What Man Ought to Be," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no. 1 (2014): 91.

[10] Pineda and Jimenez-Varea, "Popular Culture," p. 1161.

[11] *Ibid*, p. 1162.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 1164.

[13] *Ibid*, p. 1171

[14] Hultkrans, "Steve Ditko's," 209.

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[15] *Ibid*, p. 222.
[16] *Ibid*, p. 222.
[17] Sciabarra, "The Illustrated," p. 2.
[18] *Ibid*, p. 11.
[19] Andrei Molotiu, "Abstract Form: Sequential Dynamism and Iconostasis in Abstract Comics and Steve Ditko's Amazing Spider-Man," in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, ed. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 89.
[20] *Ibid*, p. 89.
[21] *Ibid*, p. 91.
[22] *Ibid*, p. 94.
[23] Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2017), p. 23.
[24] Rand, specifically, has been compared to and explicitly called a cult leader by Michael Shermer in *Why People Believe Weird Things* (1997) and Jeff Walker in *The Ayn Rand Cult* (1999).
[25] Popular historian Mitch Horowitz uncovered this specific relationship, for *The Washington Post*'s blog *Political Bookworm* for a piece called "Reagan and the Occult," published in April 2010. The article makes a direct connection between Manly P. Hall's tale of the mysterious, unknown speaker at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, published in Hall's 1944 book *The Secret Destiny of America* and Reagan's 1957 commencement address for Eureka College in 1957 as well as an essay the president penned for *Parade* in July 1981.
[26] Gwenda Blair's books *The Trumps: Three Generations of Builders and a Presidential Candidate* (2015) and *Donald Trump: The Candidate* (2015) along with Gary Lachman's *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump* (2018) have considered the connection between Trump and Peale. The key difference between the authors being that Blair's books are developing a historical look at the Trumps and their ascendancy to power and Lachman is situating the presidency of Donald Trump and the rise of the alt-right within conversations about the occult and mystic thought in the twentieth century.
[27] Steve Ditko, "Philosophy vs. No- Or Anti-Philosophy," editorial, #*25 Out of This World*, Fall 2016. Emphasis original.
[28] Steve Ditko, *Avenging World*, ed. Robin Snyder (Bellingham, WA: R. Snyder and S. Ditko, 2002), p. 3.
[29] Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 100.
[30] Horowitz, *Occult America*, p. 49.
[31] *Ibid,* p. 49. Emphasis original.
[32] Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, p. 87.
[33] *Ibid,* p. 199.
[34] *Ibid,* p. 133.
[35] Steve Ditko, "...Right to Kill!," *Mr. A no. 1*, 1973, 14.
[36] *Ibid*, p. 25
[37] In the wake of public outcry against the violence inflicted by superheroes, many of these impositions, reportedly, came directly from one-time National/DC Comics editor Whitney Ellsworth, after collaborating with DC Comics co-publisher Jack Liebowitz on the development of in-house guidelines for content (See Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, p. 165 and Brooker, p. 60).
[38] Archie Goodwin and Steve Ditko, "Deep Ruby!," in *Eerie Archives*, by Steve Ditko and Archie Goodwin, ed. Shawna Gore (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2009), 2: p. 23.
[39] This story may have been produced with writer Joe Gill, who was a frequent collaborator with Ditko at Charlton. However, there currently is no evidence to confirm that this was the case. However, I do take this as being a serious possibility and it would seem to be supported by the circumstances.
[40] Steve Ditko, "From Out of the Depths," in *Impossible Tales: The Steve Ditko Archives*, comp. Blake Bell (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), 4: p. 145.
[41] *Ibid*, p. 148
[42] *Ibid*, p. 146.
[43] *Ibid*, p. 147.
[44] Gerry Conway and Archie Goodwin, "Doomsday - Minus One," comic strip, *The Destructor, no. 4*, August 1975, p. 9. Emphasis original.

BEYOND WHAT WE ARE TOLD IS FACT

MYSTIC LIBERALISM AND CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN "IS" AND "OUGHT"

> We are living in what the Greeks called καιρὸς —the right time—for a "metamorphosis of the gods," i.e. of the fundamental principles and symbols.
>
> —Carl Jung

> The new age began in part as a reaction against authority in favor of individualism and the right to test belief by personal experience. By acquiring the right to think for himself in religious matters, man also gained freedom to live according to his convictions. … Thus, inward guidance led the way to another and more spiritual phase of liberalism.
>
> —Horatio Dresser

During a heated argument about whether or not he should investigate the murder of a colleague, Stac Rae—alias Static, a research scientist in possession of a powerful suit that enhances his physical abilities—argues with a cool intensity that "Truth has no exceptions," and that he sees "no dichotomy between *is* and *ought*."[1] This scene from Steve Ditko's *Static* gets right to the core of what drives mystic liberal thought: eliminating the difference between the world that could be and the world that currently exists. Mystic liberalism is the convergence between a spiritual search underwritten by a gospel of healthy-mindedness and the postwar politics of neoliberalism and its individualist and capitalist ideals. In 2012's *The History of New Thought*, New Thought historian John Haller notes a pull within the New Thought movement towards "a more secular ideology of success and prosperity,"[2] and while I agree with his general observation about New Thought, this neglects the substantial political component of this transition to a more secular mind-power movement. The folding in of that political component reveals a distinct approach to considering how political reality was shaped in twentieth century America, perhaps best exemplified in the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan.

Mitch Horowitz draws specific attention to how Reagan infused New Thought and mind-power language into the declaration of his candidacy in 1979, where Reagan confidently proclaimed, "If there is one thing we are sure of it is […] that nothing is impossible, and that man is capable of improving his circumstances beyond what we are told is fact."[3] What this chapter sets out to establish is, first, the intellectual and political overlap that prohibits mystic liberalism from being easily reducible to either popular configurations of liberal politics or New Thought mysticism, and, second, a set of parameters for identifying mystic liberalism in its applications as a mode of political critique.

COPING, ADAPTING, AND IMAGINING A NEW WORLD

The cultivation of mystic liberalism isn't a story of an intellectual elite and their challenges to established philosophies and institutions; rather, it's about how the masses process their historical moment, how they recreate religion after religion failed, and how they create space for themselves in the liberal marketplace after capitalism is revised. The story I want to tell about mystic liberalism is less concerned with questions of being. Instead, it's interested in the question of becoming. Who will people be when they deal with the fallout of these great failures? How will they recreate themselves? How can an *ought* be transformed into an *is*?

In the early years of the twentieth century one of the sites of that becoming was Johnstown, Pennsylvania, location of the leading steel producers in the country. The industry's demand for labor attracted thousands of immigrants in search of work and an opportunity to improve their circumstances in their home countries or to create a new life in America. In Johnstown, many of these immigrant laborers were from East Central Europe—thousands of them, in fact. But life in Johnstown was often volatile for these immigrant laborers as work at the Cambria Company, the city's major mining and steel operation, ebbed and flowed, and, for many, the crippling effects of the Great Depression and the St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936 exacerbated their struggles. Survival and self-reinvention in the face of continual uncertainty, punctuated by often-brutal economic and social circumstances, was the order of the day for many immigrant and first-generation American families in Johnstown. In the introduction to her ethnographic study of the Johnstown immigrants, *For Bread with Butter*, Ewa Morawska describes the situation in Johnstown as one of continual coping and adaptation: the "peasant-immigrants and their children [had] to solve problems and realize cultural goals and expectations in a restricted environment."[4] Among those surviving, coping, adapting families were the Ditkos.

Census records indicate that the Ditkos emigrated to the United States around 1900 from the Austro-Hungarian empire, with post-World War I records referring to their country of origin as the newly-defined and independent Czechoslovakia. Their son, Stephen, would later father artist Steve Ditko. The older Stephen was born in 1901 as an American citizen and remained in Pennsylvania, finding work in Johnstown as a master carpenter at a steel mill. And while the recently-arrived Ditkos and their American-born children were adapting to the tumultuous industrial landscape of

Johnstown with other East Central Europeans, it was the third generation of Ditkos in America who would eventually articulate a way to "solve problems and realize cultural goals and expectations in a restricted environment" by means of intellectual and artistic labor, "to invent ways to bring the environment into closer conformity to their purposes."[5] In November of 1927, Anna and Stephen Ditko welcomed their second child, Stephen J. Ditko. Very little has been written about younger Steve Ditko's early life, and my aim here is not the construction of a biography but to provide a useful backdrop against which a different way of imagining the world emerged. Before the younger Steve enlisted in the U.S. Army after World War II in 1945, and before he moved to New York City to study under and work with comics luminary Jerry Robinson at what would eventually become the School of Visual Arts, before he co-created Spider-Man and created Dr. Strange, he lived in a community constrained by the circumstances imposed by class and ethnicity.

In order to relieve the pressure of these binding forces, families and individual members of Johnstown's immigrant community took on a paradoxical existence that demanded participation in the larger marketplace as a means of achieving the goals that brought them to America while simultaneously congealing themselves into smaller, more isolated in-groups defined by familial, ethnic, and cultural affiliations.[6] Many, particularly those of the second generation, were then left with the frustrating chore of trying navigate the liminal space between the American cultural myths and assumptions about the ubiquity of opportunity for individual achievement, on the one hand, and their lived experiences with the institutional enforcement of class/ethnic impositions at school and work, on the other.[7] Explaining how this played out for Johnstown's second-generation immigrants, Morawska writes:

> As everywhere else in Pennsylvania, Johnstown was swept up in the school reform and Americanization movement, and the immigrant children at the beginning of the century were taught the natural superiority of American civilization and its fundamental values of freedom, equality, and personal achievement. [Morawska's] second generation informants remembered well-being told as children in the classroom "America is the best country on earth"; "America is the land of opportunity for all"; "You can become what you want"; and "Don't be a coal miner." Equally ingrained in the memory of those who attended public schools in Johnstown was another recollection—of recurrent feelings of embarrassment and inferiority to the "American" children, caused by difficulty with the English language (in the early grades), "foreign" dress, and "unpronounceable" names.[8]

This kind of palpable inconsistency between the dominant cultural ideology of equal opportunity and the kind of particularism that was experienced continued well through the interwar period, creating a clear sense that, although immigrants and their children were free to look up and around them, they were tightly bound to their physical and cultural place.[9]

Within that bounded existence, immigrant workers and their children were forced to look inward, both to themselves and their own racially and ethnically segregated communities, for support through the development of mutual aid coalitions, societies, clubs, and church parishes, building their own schools and newspapers. They constructed what Morawska calls an "internal framework" to cope with the challenges and restrictions of coming to America. And while there was certainly some intermingling between immigrant communities in Johnstown,[10] these separated, if not fully individuated, frameworks for each segment of the immigrant community of Johnstown helped recently-arrived East Central Europeans move purposefully towards the achievement of the goals that brought them to America in the first place.[11]

Put differently, in order for the immigrant community to survive, they had to reinvent themselves, both as individuals and as a people. The apparent solution was not to look outward towards the paternalism extended by the politically powerful Cambria Company along with its irregular labor opportunities and union busting,[12] nor was the solution to look to America or Americans, whose particularist attitudes fueled the segregation of Johnstown.[13] In order to adapt, to recreate themselves in America, the members of these communities had to recognize that the promises of their new country were mostly just that. If these promises would ever materialize for themselves or their children, they would come at a great cost, as they consistently faced concurrent threats from financial instability and strained living conditions, which were only maintained by insecure, hard labor.[14]

The efforts towards survival and self-reinvention became a multigenerational task, and a morally- and spiritually-focused, parochial education for second- and third-generation immigrants—one that reinforced the practical values attained through hands-on, hard work that trumped formal education. For many, this was an entirely rational approach, as the labor of coming generations would only generate more income that would sustain the family and, perhaps, improve their station.[15] And while, in a rather straightforward way, this appears to be a sign of social differentiation, it has the unintended consequence of signaling a kind of philosophic, as opposed to wholly pragmatic, outlook that relies on lived experience and rational decision-making similar to something like natural philosophy, which gained popularity in the Romantic and German tradition through thinkers like Goethe, as a means of linking the sensible, natural world and spiritual existence.[16]

It would seem unlikely that peasant immigrants would have a deep familiarity with the precepts and evolution of natural philosophy as Western thought moved towards the natural sciences. However, the milieu in which they existed prior to coming to America, and the pragmatism of focusing on labor and its tangible outcomes, does seem to signal a focus on the "matter" portion of Cartesian dualism and a view that matter can be produced by the labor of one's mind. As it pertains to the development of mind-power and New Thought, Haller identifies a blending of Descartes's "mind/body dualism […] to the body/soul spirituality of Jesuit Priest and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,"[17] in which New Thought thrived, offering a mind-over-body approach to a development of the self and a prosperous life.[18]

A part of this New Thought solution to the problem of Cartesian dualism was to imagine a nexus of the body and soul[19] that would permit an understanding of the mind as a generative force that acted in concert with the material world and "complemented rather than competed with reductionist" materialism.[20] In large part, this suturing together of the natural and spiritual worlds allows the quantifiable world of the body to be an extension of the qualifiable experiences of the mind. Haller refers to this suturing as an existence "beyond mechanics and geometry, serv[ing] as the instrument of God's purposes,"[21] and it reflects an insistence that the inner, spiritual life was determinative of the practical, measurable world. This view of the body—and what is reaped from the practical world—as a direct product of the labor of the mind, fits within the paradigm Morawska sets out for the Johnstown immigrants. Further, the kind of practical rationality expressed by these immigrant communities, paired with their predominantly parochial education, is also reflective of Enlightenment liberalism: particularly the kind of rationalism associated with Locke's sense of Natural Law.

The actions of Johnstown immigrants are further linked to Lockean liberalism with their focus on attaining property by means of their labor and practical actions. To be sure there is not a one-to-one correlation between the kinds of property available to the Johnstown immigrants—home ownership, for example—and Locke's imagination of property as being the product of creating utility from a given piece land. However, the approaches to property are not entirely divorced and, according to Morawska, many Johnstown immigrants, utilizing their peasant backgrounds, made use of their newly acquired property for gardens and other practical concerns.[22] The drive for property acquisition was a major component of the self-reinvention of these communities, in no small part because of the personal achievement and financial security property symbolized. For these communities it was clear that the most reliable way to overcome uncertain social and economic circumstances and earn property-holding status was through stubborn determination and practical actions, grounded by a moral and spiritual education.

Albeit unintentional, the kind of uncertainty encountered in Johnstown as it ran alongside the often-unfulfilled promises of America emerges as a kind of hybrid worldview. As opposed to a philosophic outlook born from a kind of formal, intellectual, academic approach to observations about physical and metaphysical existence, the kind of thinking that can be gleaned from Johnstown is dependent on the lived experiences of its inhabitants: a more praxeological method, or a kind of practical ratiocination.[23] Moreover, although the commitment to community and mutual aid that became part and parcel of the survival of Johnstown's immigrants would seem to run counter to later formations of liberal individualism found in mass culture, the volitional nature of these kinds of safety nets and their establishment outside of the corporate and governmental institutions speaks to a reliance on personal, familial social networks as opposed to a government-funded welfare system that conservative and libertarian thinkers would accuse of being dependent on the use of force, as opposed to choice.[24]

It's within this intellectually complex communal liberalism that Steve Ditko spends his youth—a nuanced existence that demands at once individual success and communal support, practical action and spiritual motivation, to be American and not-American, to be committed to one's labor and unable to capitalize on it, to need societal support and learn to operate without it.

ILLUMINATED POLITICS AND IMPENDING CULTURAL CHANGE

The disappointments and failures of the promises of American life for immigrants run concurrent with the apparent failures of God and Christianity during the period following World War I. Just as the promises of achievement and success in America fell dramatically short, so too did the promises of adventure and heroism for the generation that went off to fight in the trenches and face the no-man's lands in France. Setting aside the complications this would have presented to first- and second-generation immigrants originating from Central Powers countries, like many of those in Johnstown, the Great War represented a larger failure than that of any set of social circumstances. It represented the failure of authoritative institutions, the failure of religion, the failure of God.

Moreover, challenges to established religious institutions would not have been new to those of East Central European descent, nor would it be to many Americans, who seemingly existed in a perpetual state of spiritual revision from the word go. The myriad approaches to religious and mystical thought throughout the West ranged from very traditional, conservative perspectives that wanted to re-entrench centralized authority to the very liberal that sought not just freedom of thought and belief but a freedom of action that, for some, would border on licentiousness. The American Northeast, with its Burned-Over District and Psychic Highway was a major site of spiritual change, both radical and conservative.[25] Similar to the ways in which America has imagined itself as a great experiment in republican politics, so, too, has it served as a haven and laboratory for religious experimentation. Whether one takes these perspectives, these religions-after-religion, as fantasies or as acceptable truths is significantly less important than the effects these beliefs can have once they become institutionalized as a part of the values and social groups of a particular culture. Ultimately, as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke puts it, these fantasies become an "important symptom of impending cultural changes and political action."[26]

While the industrial revolution attracted immigrants from Central Europe to places like Johnstown—offering the potential for a transformed, if not better, existence—earlier generations of Central Europeans had produced waves of occultists and mystic thinkers who were often forced to abandon their homelands as they searched for their own transformative experiences and new lives, often leading them to the Americas. The occult diaspora is an important component of those East Coast religious movements noted above, but, through organizations like the Freemasons, it's also inextricably linked to the political foundations of American government, influencing private and public existence. Writers on the occult, like Mitch Horowitz, Gary Lachman, James Webb, and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, have constructed convincing histories of the occult and how these myriad systems of belief commingled and evolved over centuries, typically tying their origins to the Early Modern era and its challenges to Catholic hegemony in Europe as well as the period's political and cultural pressure. What is at stake is that these are and were sincerely held ideas that informed the political actions for a range of communities.

Further, these modern accounts of occult history also work diligently to link occult and esoteric beliefs to political reform, an entanglement that Webb sees most directly as a product of post-World War I anxieties and led to what he calls an "illuminated politics." For Webb, to be "illuminated" is to be of a "reality that transcends the materialist point of view and the emergence of the rejected—both ideas and men—into unaccustomed positions of prominence."[27] In other words, an illuminated politics emerges, in part, because of the challenges presented by a social and political underclass, and, Webb continues, the occult "embodies basic attitudes toward both universal and historical conditions."[28] Although both Lachman and Horowitz mount persuasive challenges to Webb's narrow historicizing,[29] both also seem to embrace Webb's sense of an "illuminated politics" as an effective means for understanding the relationship between the occult and the political maneuvering of the West, along with the twentieth-century Western occult revival during the interwar period and beyond. Although this book does not seek to position itself as anything resembling a complete occult history, what it does seek to do is employ a broader, established occult history to explain a particular operation of an illuminated politics.

Histories of the occult, like those noted above, often contain dual yields: they provide insight into how such beliefs motivated a politically powerful elite while also noting how those same conceptions of reality were often grounded in historical moments and populations that demanded social change because practitioners either were or believed themselves to be powerless. The quest for a kind of illuminated politics, in that case, is, as Goodrick-Clark insists, an indicator of pending societal change resulting in the consolidation or redistribution of political power, be it in a liberal context like the French Revolution or with the rise of fascism in Weimar

Germany. Even if it is uncomfortable to acknowledge, the common ground in the establishment of an illuminated politics is societal and economic uncertainty. There are any number of potential causes for that uncertainty, but as the authors noted above have convincingly maintained, this uncertainty was met with opposition from a more politically powerful establishment, be it the Church or the state. This led to micro and macro rebellions or escape to destinations that, ostensibly, were more spiritually egalitarian, like the United States.

To put it more directly, I am forming an argument dependent upon a multilayered syncretism, that, at one level, holds that the kind of spiritual seekers that were attracted to the United States in its early years were drawn there because they saw an opportunity to practice and experiment with new forms of belief, self-directed forms of discovery. In an adjoining moment, many people, like those that populated Johnstown, Pennsylvania, migrated because they were also seekers, looking for an improved social and economic existence. That both of these communities emerge from a place that was, as all of the historians noted above acknowledge, a locus of transformative esoteric thought is too coincidental to overlook.

These syncretic complexities are expanded not only by the diversity of religious experimentation already happening in the United States, but also by the uncertainty experienced by the "Lost Generation" after World War I. Moreover, these post-War uncertainties and anxieties manifested in popular and political forms, reinforcing and perpetuating themselves among the masses, largely through what was later known as Modernism as its literary modes were made available to mass audiences through publishers of pulp novels.[30] But, as should be clear, not everyone was so nihilistic as many of the Modernists, and there were many who began looking for *something* rather than learning to accept that there was *nothing*.

Like the immigrants who came to America and turned inwards towards their isolated communities for salvation and regeneration, America, and the West at large, was also asked to turn inward when trying to recuperate from the perceived failures of God and the state. For these seekers, the question was one of regeneration. Part of that quest meant looking to generations past and how they attempted to resolve these concerns. One of the ultimate consequences was the cultivation of a class of organic intellectuals[31] that were not reliant on traditional modes of knowledge production or contemporary intelligentsia.

One of the most significant figures to emerge from the smelter of the occult factories in America was the Russian-born immigrant, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, more famously known as Madame Blavatsky in the *fin de siècle* milieu. Although Blavatsky had never really disappeared from the public consciousness in the way many other ideanauts of her ilk had, it was through her that the term "occult" became a part of the public lexicon, and her ideas were less related to the establishment of doctrinal authority than they were about individual search for enlightenment, a particularly useful notion for those looking for something other than perceptibly hollow liturgical promises of established religion.

Blavatsky arrived in America in the early 1870s with the intent to challenge Spiritualism by, in part, revealing its limitations. Blavatsky's aim was not to debunk the claims of Spiritualism, as Harry Houdini would make his mission in later years. Rather, although Blavatsky admired Andrew Jackson Davis, the movement's founder, she wanted to illuminate a path towards a higher truth. Of course, Blavatsky did not claim that her role as shepherd was her own invention; it was revealed to her by a secret order or masters of ancient wisdom, the "Mahatmas," who had achieved a kind of *inner* purity. On this fateful mission to America, Blavatsky met Henry Steel Olcott, a former Civil War officer, invested in Spiritualism.

After their partnering, Blavatsky and Olcott went on to develop Blavatsky's magnum opus, *Isis Unveiled*, an expansive text that covers a variety of occult subjects, and revealed to readers that there were secret teachings, unknown to both mainstream religion and scientific materialism. This hidden doctrine would provide a kind of cosmological unity that was available to all by gaining access to a divine wisdom. Blavatsky and Olcott organized their suppliants in this quest for wisdom into the Theosophical Society, but, as Horowitz points out, Theosophy "was not a religion itself but rather aimed to plumb the *inner depths* of religion."[32]

For Horowitz and others, Blavatsky opened the Western mind to a modern notion of the man of wisdom.[33] This, of course, is different from the Nietzschean notion of the wise man atop the mountain, as in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Rather than the wise man coming down from the mountain to examine and impart his wisdom on the people, it is up to individual seekers to find the wise man in the Blavatskian configuration. Of course, this is not to say that there were no other men of wisdom in the Western tradition who must be sought—one might point to mythic figures like Christ or Merlin or even Nietzsche's muse, Zarathustra.

What Horowitz argues is that Blavatsky reignites a contemporary interest in such figures, and this interest is, in part, made more modern and compelling because Blavatsky's Mahatmas are accessible now, as opposed to being some unreachable figures of an ancient past. One need only to search, and through that search, the spiritual pilgrim could do more than drink from the same deep waters as the man of ancient wisdom. That pilgrim could drink *with* him. If one could not physically connect with such a person, then there was at least the possibility to directly connect through some psychic, invisible means. At the very least, the searcher could connect through a tradition that was emanating from something contemporary. Whether any of these possibilities were literally actualized by anyone is significantly less important than the romantic notion that they *could* have been for the individual true believer.

That Blavatsky reintroduces what Horowitz calls "the intercessor, the adept, the master, the figure of wisdom, the invisible helper" is significant to the evolution of the American popular and political consciousness. This intercessor comes from a mysterious, unknown place, imparts wisdom or knowledge, or perhaps rights a wrong, and disappears from the scene—a sort of occult vigilante. One might be inclined to point to other intercessory figures who appeared earlier in American literature, as in George Lippard's "Ring, Grandfather, Ring,"[34] or in more sinister intercessors like in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and I would agree. What both of these examples would appear to point to is a pre-existing interest in mystical influence in the founding of America and its liberal ideals—in a romantic and cautionary sense, respectively. While the pump may have been primed for Blavatsky by such literature, as is often the case in such matters, what remains is that it's the efforts of Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society that provide a particular, occult shape for this intercessory figure, making such an archetype available to mass culture for popular appropriation and reinterpretation.

Another major popular component of Blavatsky's Theosophy is her understanding of the machinations of karma, which in many ways operates like the intercessory function of the masters of ancient wisdom. In her essays on the nature of reincarnation and karma in *The Key to Theosophy*, Blavatsky offers the following notion of karma:

> …it [is] the *Ultimate Law* of the Universe, the source, origin, and fount of all other laws which exist throughout Nature. … *Karma* is that unseen and unknown law *which adjusts wisely, intelligently and equitably* each effect to its cause, tracing the latter back to its producer. Though itself *unknowable*, its action is perceivable.[35]

Blavatsky's claim here that karma can be understood by its observable effects gives karma the appearance of a machine-like apparatus for sorting out good and evil, the metaphysical existence of which is provable through observation. This kind of scientizing of karma—that, like gravity or evolution, it can be observed and measured through its products and effects—will be important to bear in mind later, but for my immediate purposes, note that karma, like the hero-vigilante or the wise intercessor, comes from an unknown, mysterious place, acts on behalf of a sort of infinite, cosmic wisdom, and disappears until its powers are needed again.

But, of course, Theosophy didn't have exclusive jurisdiction over access to cosmic wisdom or the gifts of prosperity and health that it grants. During the scientizing of mid-nineteenth century, matters ranging from illness to nature to economics to human behavior could all be mechanized and scrutinized so as not just to draw observational conclusions about the past, but to make testable predictions of the future, harnessing the power of these predictions for the betterment of humankind. Within this cultural current, questions begin to surface about what else could be scientized for societal or individual benefit. Could one mechanize and tap into the supernatural—Christian or otherwise—or could one develop a protocol for creating happiness or wealth? Was there a formula for transforming one's dreams into tangible reality? These questions were answered in the affirmative by what would eventually be called New Thought, a system of belief that had its origins in Christian socialism and was, by the mid-twentieth century, fully co-opted by neoliberalism. With its origins in Christian socialism and its promises of making one's wishes come true if they just believe hard enough, it's not difficult to see why New Thought would be compatible and, indeed, embraced by a country—one with an already established mythology about individual achievement—in the throes of cultural and economic upheaval in the nineteenth century. This embrace would provide the footholds for New Thought to become reinvigorated in the global crises of consciousness and economics that followed World War I.

In many ways, New Thought is like most religions and religious movements: it's open to interpretation; its genealogy up to the present is a bit tangled and sprawling;[36] and it works as a sort of Velcro ideology that can attach itself to lots of other ideologies. As a result, New Thought is difficult to contain and is often commonly understood through its antecedents and cousins in Mesmerism, Christian Science, and the more commonly—if vaguely—used "power of positive thinking," among others. In its essence, New Thought imagines "the subconscious as an extension of Divine power,"[37] postulating that humans, through concerted, positive thought can alter their physiology to improve their health, create and maintain happiness, create improved social interactions, and create wealth. Rooted in mystical and occult thought, typically blended with Christianity, New Thought has had a robust, porous spiritual network that allowed its ideas to disseminate widely, undercutting the kind of hierarchy found in organized religion. But despite these religious roots, it was New Thought's secular iterations that produced some of its most recognizably influential texts.

Two of the most widely read secular texts to come from New Thought were Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). Whether Peale or Carnegie's readers knew they were imbibing thinly veiled mysticism or not, New Thought's emphasis on success that comes from a can-do attitude made a terrific religion for the congregations of corporate America. Maintaining an appropriate amount of self-esteem became paramount and believing that one could achieve greatness through the power of thought meant not that one could, but that they would. But the mid-century focus on self-esteem, success, and personal independence produced some competition for the superficially secular strands of New Thought, yielding one of the most popular, influential, and controversial philosophies of the twentieth century: Objectivism.

Within this same milieu of sustained interest in the occult and New Thought positive thinking came an interesting bit of syncretism: just as it was a Russian-born immigrant in Madame Blavatsky who introduced the vocabulary of the occult to the modern Western lexicon, it was another Russian-born immigrant, Ayn Rand, who reshaped the imagination of capitalism for a popular audience through her philosophy of Objectivism. Like Blavatsky, Rand grounded her beliefs through the cultivation of a close inner-circle of followers. She gained popular appeal by disseminating her ideas through mass market book publication, with major cultural impacts made by books like *Anthem* (1938), *The Fountainhead* (1943), her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), and non-fiction collections of essays such as *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964) and *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1966), which feature work from Rand, Nathaniel Branden, and Alan Greenspan, and all remain in print from major mass market publishers.

Rand's philosophic approach was a response to what she held as the failures of collectivism—with which she lumped religion—especially as she experienced it during the Russian Revolution. Further, like Blavatsky's attempt to revive perceived ancient wisdom, Rand attempted to rehabilitate the image of capitalism in an era of New Deal progressivism while also working to revitalize interest in her own version of Aristotelianism, Aristotle having fallen out of favor with some contemporary philosophers.[38] And like the assurances of a new age that New Thoughtism propagated, Rand and her one-time associate and lover, Nathaniel Branden, attempted to build a philosophy for who they described as the "new intellectual," resisting the academic and intellectual elites who dismissed their ideology.[39]

HARNESSING A BENEVOLENT UNIVERSE

Objectivism, as constructed by Rand, holds itself as an optimistic view of life that celebrates human achievement, exalts reason and rationality, and values the individual over the collective. In explaining this idealistic view, Rand writes, "My philosophy, in essence is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." And, like esotericists and mystics of before, Rand cites her own lived experience as some of the greatest evidence for the effectiveness and worth of this belief system, claiming that she has "held the same philosophy I now hold, for as far back as I can remember. … I have never had to change any of my fundamentals."[40] If it worked for her, then it can work for anyone who sufficiently devoted their self to a non-sacrificial pursuit of reason and personal happiness. The heroes of Rand's novels, and her ideals, travel down just such a path, neither giving nor receiving what Rand would identify as the undeserved. Objectivist heroes were men and women of achievement—in *The Fountainhead* they are artists and builders like Howard Roark, and in *Atlas Shrugged* the heroes are captains of industry, but they can also be, like Rand, creators of ideas—and whatever their talent, they are producers who are pitted against society's looters, those who lust after the unearned and wish to devalue human achievement.

As with my earlier considerations of occult and esoteric thought, the intellectual/philosophic merits of Objectivism are not quite what's at stake for me, and there is much to be scrutinized within the idealistic framework Rand established. So, while Objectivism will not be able to escape critique here, that precise evaluation is not my principle interest. Moreover, there already exist numerous serious examinations of Rand and Objectivism from a range of perspectives.[41] Instead, I want to be able to reasonably identify the philosophy, as it self-describes, and from there consider a particular application of it within popular culture.

Without a doubt, the syncretic work being done here will ruffle the feathers of some ardent Objectivists, but, again, this book is a consideration of effect rather than intent. Further, a precedent has already been set for attempting to merge Objectivism with different kinds of (often mystical) thought.[42] Admittedly, some of that blending of Objectivism with seemingly antithetical ideas exists on the fringes of the cultural conversation surrounding Rand, but others exist in highly visible ways in popular culture. Indeed, the appropriation of Rand occurs across a wide range of belief systems, from ostensibly Christian politicians[43] to the Church of Satan, the latter of which insisting that although Rand's philosophy and Satanism are unique from one another, "Satanism drew from Objectivism as even Rand drew others."[44] Horowitz, too, comfortably blends an interest in the Church of Satan, Madame Blavatsky, New Thought, and Objectivism as a part of his own work.

The obvious difficulty here is that for Rand and Objectivists, mystic and esoteric thought is incompatible with an objective, natural view of reality. But there are moments in Objectivist thought that contravene this position, pointing at a more complex view. For example, according to the Atlas Society, "Objectivism holds that we live in a 'benevolent universe'" that would afford us the opportunity to "achieve happiness and exaltation." And even though Objectivism rejects the notion that neither reality, as it exists, nor a deity are watching over human action, nature can be commanded, "and this is what makes the universe essentially benevolent: It is propitious to beings like us."[45] So, although Objectivists pride themselves on their reason and rationality—believing they have banished the ghosts of previous philosophy and religion, there's something about this ideology that remains haunted.

The notion of a "benevolent universe" alone implies some kind of exterior force that guides nature along; even if it doesn't concern itself with human affairs, at least a minimal form of agency is implied. Would a truly objective reality not begin from the null hypothesis, with no behavior or perception inferred other than ambivalence? Objectivism's dedication to *laissez-faire* capitalism and Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is another area that raises questions about the infusion of mystic thought;[46] so, too, does acceptance of transubstantiation that occurs with Locke's notion of property that materializes through labor; and the infusion of Nathaniel Branden's conception of self-esteem also points to a kind of "science of the mind" capitalizing on the work Wallace Wattles, though quite differently motivated.[47] What all of these have in common with occult and esoteric thought, like Theosophy and New Thought, is that they rely on the "conviction that divine mysteries existed not at a top rung of the cosmic ladder but within the settings of ordinary life."[48] The notion of "self-esteem" was incorporated into

Objectivism by Rand and, particularly, Nathaniel Branden, who, after his excommunication from Rand's Objectivist movement, made a career as a pop psychologist, writing over a dozen books on self-esteem.

Taking all of this into consideration, Objectivism's claims to a kind of material rationality appear to be a kind of shell game where the concretes, the intellectual absolutes Objectivist thought extolls, are always under one of the other shells. A case can be made that, at its core, Objectivist epistemology is dependent upon the same kind of mystical thought that, as the question suggests, were part and parcel of the religious thinking that Objectivism claims to render obsolete, including the occult thought attributable to later movements like New Thought and Theosophy.

As has been pointed out, those overlaps would be and are still vehemently denied by Objectivists, and terms like "mysticism" are demonized in their lexicography. Earlier individualist philosophers like Max Stirner associated concepts like ethics, reason, the family, and morality with the shackles of mystical thought imposed by religion and the state.[49] In order to skirt such criticism, Rand and her ilk needed also to demonize previous philosophers like Stirner by labeling them as "counterfeit individualists," accusing them of being unprincipled hedonists and whim[50] worshipers.[51] Stirner is seldom mentioned or deeply interrogated in the collections of early Objectivist thought by Rand and others, and the brief criticism noted here does little to address Stirner's critiques and the question of the ultimate origins of notions like "ethics." However, through the work of Steve Ditko we can gain insight into this apparently contradictory mode of thinking propagated by Objectivism as well as the genealogical transition from the more openly mystical and religious individualist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the US into the allegedly more materialistic neoliberal and libertarian political thought of the post-World War II period.

Unfortunately for Objectivism, the dodging of the mystical issue isn't quite satisfactory, and, to that end, it's worth at least briefly considering Stirner's position on matters of the self, and his concern with the ghosts of the mind, the mystical prisons, that have the potential to trap the individual egoist.[52] Stirner categorizes the very sacredness of truths, whether they be allegedly secular or explicitly spiritual, as ghosts of the mind. These ghosts include but are not limited to "laws," "rights," "morality," "family," "love," "religion," and even "science" and "reason" themselves. Says Stirner:

> *Concepts* are to decide everywhere, concepts to regulate life, concepts to *rule*. This is the religious world … bringing method into nonsense and completing the conceptual precepts into a rounded, firmly-based dogmatic. Everything is sung according to concepts, and the real man, I, am compelled to live according to these conceptual laws. …
>
> Liberalism simply brought other concepts on the carpet; human instead of divine, political instead of ecclesiastical, "scientific" instead of doctrinal, or, more generally, real concepts and eternal laws instead of "crude dogmas" and precepts.[53]

In the most generous scenario, acceptance of such concepts should be treated as volitional, with the recognition that they are artificial constructs. In the ideal situation, Stirner argues, they should be exorcised from one's mind, and only once that happens, one can legitimately consider oneself free. If one cannot eliminate these specters of mystical thinking, then freedom is never really possible to Stirner, and without such an exorcism a full comprehension of the self is nearly impossible.

In his essay "Counterfeit Individualism," Nathaniel Branden accuses Stirner of proffering an individualism based on "doing whatever one wishes, regardless of the rights of others," and insists that Objectivist individualism "is at once an ethical-political concept and an ethical-psychological one."[54] This is all well and good, but it ducks Stirner's major questions: *where do "rights" and "ethics" originate? Who or what is the prime mover there? And whatever the answer, is abdicating one's mind to those ethical principles or those notions of rights differ in any significant way from the deferring to a god or the state? Is one still not dominated by mystic forces that are allegedly beyond one's comprehension?* The answer for Stirner is obvious, but this begs questions about what exactly is the supposedly-counterintuitive relationship between objectivism and mystical thought.

In order to address this point, considering Theosophy as well as the New Thought movement is helpful.[55] However, it is first worth unpacking Objectivism's vehement rejection of anything that it considers to be "mysticism." According to the *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, "mysticism" is understood as: "the acceptance of allegations without evidence or proof, either apart from or *against* the evidence of one's senses and one's reason. Mysticism is the claim to some non-sensory, non-rational, non-definable, non-identifiable means of knowledge, such as 'instinct,' 'intuition,' 'revelation,' or any form of ‘just knowing.’”[56] The immediate issue here, as Stirner would point out, is how do the fields of ethics, politics, and reason evade this definition of mysticism? I accept Stirner’s position and argue that they don’t, and Objectivism’s attempt to scientize metaphysical concepts, making them in some way tangible and thus justifying their dominion over human psychology and action, helps to make Stirner’s case for him. One significant way in which this happens is through Rand’s attempt to treat ethics “as a science” in order to discover and define a reasonable code by which to live.[57]

Rand’s attempt to scientize ethics is reminiscent of earlier attempts by occultists and mystics to make spiritual and religious matters not just discernable to, but measurable by, the human mind. For H. P. Blavatsky, a clear instance of this is her consideration of karma attended to in the introduction. The metaphysical existence of karma, and its machine-like apparatus for sorting out good and evil, is provable through observation. This runs parallel to Rand’s insistence that ethics is an “objective necessity” for sorting out values (i.e. good and evil), which pre-exist as a “metaphysical fact.”[58] In both cases, the existence of “good and evil” is, as Rand explains, an “unalterable condition of man’s existence.”[59] Although Blavatsky and Rand differ on whether or not the prime mover in this situation is knowable (Blavatsky says no, and Rand makes no attempt to explain where good and evil originate beyond repeating her conception of “reason”), in both cases, “good and evil,” “karma,” and “ethics” return us to Stirner’s contention that these are mystic entrapments that haunt any attempt at an individuated existence.

If there remain significant questions about layering of mysticism and liberal individualism or whether believers in either made a conscious connection between the two, then the emergence of the New Thought movement should put those concerns to rest. In his 1919 text *A History of the New Thought Movement*, Horatio Dresser, a leader of the movement and son of its founder, provides both a history of the movement itself (as the title of his book cleverly implies) as well as introducing the concept of the "new age" more than half a century before it became a proper noun in the 1970s. For Dresser, "the history of the New Thought is for the most part the record of one of several contemporaneous movements in favor of the inner life and the individual," and it is positioned in opposition of what he considers the "subjectivism of the nineteenth century."[60]

Dresser positions New Thought as the central component of the new age, which he defines as being a response to the horrors of the first world war, and that "the new age began in part as a reaction against authority in favor of individualism and the right to test belief by personal experience,"[61] further asserting that "to be liberal is to be of the new age."[62] For Dresser, what was needed for the New Age was "a spiritual science,"[63] one that assisted in interpreting Christian scripture and also psychological healing and better living, all achieved through individual introspection and action positioning each person as their own "priest and physician."[64] Further, "if we fail in life, our own attitude is at fault,"[65] insists Dresser. Without getting too far ahead of myself, this is precisely the kind of thinking that Steve Ditko employs in his introduction to *The Avenging World*, writing that, "Nations, races, and groups don't cause problems, individuals cause problems. The world isn't in a mess, people are a mess," and cleaning up the world's problems begins with "'man,' with a single person—with oneself!"[66]

In Dresser's explanation of the lineage of New Thought, he prefigures the kind of thinking that would appear from Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden when he writes:

> Man is by divine purpose, by birth, and his true human inheritance, free. He must come forth and "claim by his freedom," the true freedom of his inner or spiritual nature. He should take his cue from the ideal, not from the actualities or his natural existence. He should rely on himself, develop his inner powers, believe in his own experiences and intuitions.[67]

Compare this sample passage to the following from Rand's "The Objectivist Ethics":

> Nothing is given to man on earth except a potential and the material on which to actualize it. The potential is a superlative machine: his consciousness; but it is a machine without a spark plug, a machine of which his own will has to be the spark plug, the self-starter and the driver; *he* has to discover how to use it and *he* has to keep it in constant action. The material is the whole universe, with no limits set to the knowledge he can acquire and to the enjoyment of life he can achieve. But everything he needs or desires has to be learned, discovered and produced by *him*—by his own choice, by his own effort, by his own mind.[68]

While Rand, of course, jettisons any explicitly mystic language, both Dresser and Rand demand an acknowledgment of man as a being born both free and with access to unlimited potential that can be achieved only by means of his "inner powers" and his continual engagement with them. A suspension of that engagement means, for Dresser, a forfeiture of his freedom, and, for Rand, an abandonment of rationality, terms that are all but interchangeable in the Objectivist mindset.

The overlap of New Thought and Objectivism continues with the introduction of "self-esteem" into Objectivist thought by Nathaniel Branden. For Objectivism, self-esteem can only be earned by performance—actualization of one's abilities without apology. Indeed, this pairs nicely with the New Thought movement and its advocacy for reliance on oneself to "develop [one's] inner powers, believe in [one's] own experiences and intuitions." Branden takes this several steps further by arguing that a lack of self-esteem is the root cause of nearly all societal and psychological ills including but not limited to drug addiction, domestic violence, alcoholism, and all varieties of crime. All of these extend from the absence of self-esteem, and the suspicious link between this and the specious reasoning of Horatio Dresser's notion that "if we fail in life, our own attitude is at fault," is nearly impossible to overlook.[69]

But the links between Branden—with his push for "self-esteem"—Objectivists, and occult and mystic thought don't stop there. Branden, a previously self-identified Marxist converted to capitalism by Rand, championed the cause of self-esteem, and after his excommunication from Rand's Objectivist circles in 1968, spent the 1970s through the 1990s as a self-styled self-help, pop-psychology guru, writing a dozen or so books on self-esteem, beginning with *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* in 1969. During Branden's time with Rand, and during his operation of the Nathaniel Branden Institute (NBI), Branden operated in a manner indistinguishable from other cult-like self-help seminars[70] raking in thousands upon thousands of dollars.[71] Perhaps tellingly, in *The Ayn Rand Cult*, Jeff Walker compares the relationship between Rand and Branden to Christian Science's Mary Baker Eddy and her follower Ebenezer Foster,[72] Christian Science being a precursor to New Thought. Walker's history provides further insight, linking Branden with New Age psychologist Roger Callahan, the developer of so-called Thought Field Therapy, along with Lee Shulman and his book *Subliminal: The New Channel to Personal Power*.[73] Moreover, Brandon is an advocate for hypnotism,[74] a practice with deep roots in occult and mystic thought going back to its origins with Mesmerism and Andrew Jackson Davis.[75]

While there remains an all but zero percent chance that the likes of Ayn Rand or the disciples that inherited the Ayn Rand Institute would acknowledge any overlap Objectivism and its offspring have with the occult and mystic thought that directly preceded it, it seems clear that the principles of those earlier thought forms are mirrored in Objectivism. Not only would Rand have vigorously denied the claims made here, we can trace moments where she had made other such denials with the influence that Nietzsche had on her development as a thinker and even on her own familial history with Judaism. Rand denied both influences at every opportunity,[76] but as later critics and historians like Jeff Walker and Brian Doherty have pointed out, the overlaps with and influence of Nietzschean philosophy are an inescapable component of Objectivism. In *The Ayn Rand Cult*, Walker also makes the case that Objectivism is essentially rooted in Judaism and the Jewish experience, but of course, Rand would move quickly to deny any linkage of her philosophy to anyone but herself, much less the collective experience of her religious, ethnic heritage. So, the potential denial from Rand or her acolytes is effectively rendered moot when stacked up against the textual, cultural, and historic evidence to the contrary. Further, if one accepts the claims of the likes of Jeff Walker and Michael Shermer that Randian Objectivism operated (and continues to operate) as a cult, existing principally to venerate its inerrant and omniscient leader, then one need only take objections with a grain of salt, in the same way that Biblical critics, Christian mystics, and early individualists of the nineteenth century understood the infallibility of the Church.

The question remains: is it possible to rectify the mystical problem in Objectivist thought? I don't believe it is, certainly not in a way that would bust all of the ghosts lurking within the philosophy. Objectivism seems to be guilty of the same sin they accuse mystics of: they want it both ways. Objectivism wants a wholly rational, machine-like universe, with pre-existing ethical codes and value systems that can be discerned by the human mind/experience, and also one that is free from mysticism and the "ghosts of the mind." The shell game they're playing that continually puts such an existence just one move away is not sustainable as either a thought-exercise or a coherent philosophy. This seems more than evident based on the philosophic arguments mounted by Stirner as well as the documented history of Objectivism, and the situation is only made worse when Objectivism is easily compared (not contrasted) with competing occult and mystic thought also popular during the twentieth century. Objectivism was not polluted at some point; it was corrupted from the start and never convincingly established itself as being even internally consistent. Indeed, particularly with its arguably cult-like existence, Objectivism ultimately operates as another kind of religion, one ironically similar to those that it tried to delegitimize, making it a useful set of values for an illuminated politics interested in economic liberalism.

If the circumstances of Theosophy, New Thought, and Objectivism are components of a particular kind of illuminated politics, how can we narrow Webb's initial notion down to a specific set of operations that can be observed as a part of American political discourse in the twentieth century? Part of what drives Webb's illuminated politics is not just the crisis of consciousness of the post-World War I period but that, in the simplest terms, such a crisis demands people decide "whether things are going to get better or not, and what [they] can do about [their] life's situation." In other words, if a person disapproves of the circumstances of their existence, what can that person do to produce a better one? In Webb's formulation, this can take place at the societal level, leading to the leveling of institutions or the embrace of force as an effective means of change, or it can also work on the level of self-improvement of the individual. Acknowledging that this is a frequent question throughout history and philosophy, Webb insists that the crisis of World War I led to a revision of the human being as one "palpably imperfect and self-destructive," leading to the rise of fascism and Nazi Germany.[77] Webb makes a compelling case here that, in spite of the objections of later writers on the occult, does help to make sense of the kind of cultural, intellectual milieu that would produce such horrific results. The obvious limitation of this perspective is that it does not account for how the post-war crisis of consciousness attempted to resolve itself elsewhere.

The kind of illuminated politics at play in the United States vacillates between gestures towards conservative traditionalism and progressivism, but in the interwar and post-World War II period, the dominant forces are perhaps better understood as a kind of mystic liberalism. In the same way that Webb's illuminated politics emerges from "the rejected—both ideas and men—into unaccustomed positions of prominence," mystic liberalism, too, is rooted in ideas that had previously failed and were either outright rejected or revised to a point where they were no longer recognizable as their previous forms. Whether the practitioners of mystic liberalism were actually a rejected class is a more complicated issue. In the sense that many of the components of this belief system are rooted in progressive esoteric and religious movements and the experiences of immigrant and laboring classes, yes, these are people who were on the margins of mainline American culture. However, as mystic liberalism refined its operations and adopted the precepts and methodology of New Thought, it conscripted operatives from a wide range of social and economic classes who were united by an ideology that benefitted these individuals unevenly.

By syncretizing New Thoughtism with reconfigured notions of capitalism and individualism, particularly those found in the writings of Ayn Rand and, later, Nathaniel Branden, mystic liberalism works as a corollary to libertarianism and neoliberalism. I use "neoliberalism" to indicate a social and economic theory that posits that an unfettered, or at least less regulated, free market will foster the conditions for better income distribution and economic growth, while encouraging the social and technological advances that will make these economic circumstances possible. This view also holds that state intervention in the market will either cripple or eliminate the possibility of such growth and development. If we accept the general notion that neoliberalism represents a resurgence of nineteenth century economic thought and *laissez-faire* capitalism,[78] mystic liberalism posits a revival of late-nineteenth century occult and mystic thought as it relates to the formation of the individual through a decentralized, personal quest for the self. Further, through that search, and by maintaining positive thoughts—a sense of self-esteem—one can materialize a better, more socially and financially prosperous existence.

Like neoliberalism, this insistence on shifting away from the constrictions of institutionalized knowledge-production—and, therefore, self-production—harkens back to classical liberal ideology, which as considered by early proponents like Locke and later ones like Mill, rejects absolute authority as a means for granting existence, either literal or by means of social class. The state, religion, lineage—none of these things should be the deterministic forces in production of the individual (an individual being an entity who has a pre-existing right to property, life, and liberty, and, for the mystic liberal, individualized cosmic understanding). This mode of thought is distinct from relying on the state or organized religion to be the distributor of these ideas as privileges.

Mystic liberalism works as an addendum to this, pointing to a means through which individuals might identify where those pre-existing rights originate by making the cosmos object. In the face of scientific and atheistic challenges to anything resembling a divine order and origin for human existence, mystic liberalism responds by making the machinations of some kind of cosmological order object. By systematizing mystic ideas like karma, god, or—as someone like Max Stirner might suggest—ethics, mystic liberals allow themselves to maintain the ideals of classical liberalism and provide a tangible, reasoned order which supports their political actions. In this regard, mystic liberalism takes things a step further by providing specific means for reproducing individuals; by plumbing the depths of their psyches, reading specific texts, rationalizing/ordering certain abstract concepts, adherents of this kind of thinking gain special abilities to heal themselves, know the cosmos, gain and preserve wealth and independence, and rationalize the origins of pre-existing rights outlined in a more classically liberal approach.

FREE FROM THE WILLS OF OTHERS

While the production of mystic liberalism works within ongoing conversations about liberalism, individualism, and the self, this ideology is not necessarily a response to intellectual shifts in academia or among intellectual elites. Rather, mystic liberalism is a movement that has practitioners who either claimed or actually were of more modest intellectual pedigree. Because they were not among the elite, there is an assumption that their occasional poaching and repackaging of philosophic, ancient, or non-Western ideas that conform to their pre-existing belief system helps make these ideas palatable to their believers. Put differently, mystic liberals are responding to their cultural milieu, formulating an ideology that, by its largely experiential nature, is a reactive search for tangible results by the masses, as opposed to the critical examination of admittedly abstract notions by academic philosophers.

For mystic liberals, ultimate truth and knowledge are not granted, gifted from an outside authority, but are discovered, earned by excavating each unique human conscience. Once the secrets/means to objectifying the cosmos have been established, then they become easily transmittable to other people who may discover the same secrets for themselves, and then those people can choose to embrace or reject those secrets. This element of personal choice is also important because access to the machinations of the cosmos are only available through an internal search, interrogating the conscience/conscious that these secrets can be revealed and confirmed. They cannot necessarily be granted from some ecclesiastical authority. Spiritual leaders can only make the apparatus of illumination available, and, from there, illumination is autodidactically acquired, making everything comprehendible for those who are willing to do the work. Although the notion of self-producing individuals in a liberal political economy is not a new idea, the emphasis on mystic thought—in some cases a belief in the literal power of positive thinking—is an important distinction with peculiar results in the interwar and post-World War II era.

While the word "individualism" does not appear to surface in English until almost 1800, and its contemporary usage does not come along until the late 1820s,[79] it is only in the mid-nineteenth century that it becomes commonly used in print.[80] However, liberalism, as an outgrowth of post-Enlightenment attitudes, sets Western thought on the path to its early usage by Alexis de Tocqueville[81] and John Stuart Mill,[82] and twentieth-century approaches to classical Enlightenment liberalism have worked to demonstrate that connection, if not conflate the terms. In many cases, this conflating of terms and usages is convincing, as in the case of C.B. MacPherson's theory of possessive individualism.[83] For my purposes, what's useful about possessive individualism is that it makes a convincing case for how liberalism functions in the service of the production of humans.

For McPherson's formulation of possessive individualism, "what makes a man human is freedom from the dependence on the wills of others,"[84] and the distinction made in this proposition—who is and is not a person—is essential to the question of how fully formed individuals navigate a liberal space. This, along with McPherson's six other propositions for possessive individualism[85], gives a clear sense of the political and economic circumstances which allow individuals to operate free of obligation to society. What it does not do is provide the apparatus for achieving that freedom and, therefore, the (re)production of individuals. So, while possessive individualism is useful after the fact, the intervention made by mystic liberalism provides a mechanism for creating some of the individuals that occupy the space defined by McPherson.

But classical liberals were interested in mechanisms for production as well, and in the case of Locke, the production and gaining of property can only result from one's labor. Mystic liberalism doesn't reject labor as the means for creating and gaining property. Instead, it expands the notion of labor to a labor of the self. One's physical labor, one's art, is, for many mystic liberals, like Steve Ditko, a driving force in creating meaning, but one should also toil away at self-understanding, thereby creating oneself. One way to do that is to explore what I refer to as cosmic intraspace—plumbing the depths of the mind and battling ghosts and specters therein (this idea will be explored more in depth in later chapters). Further, if there is a god or cosmological order, cosmic intraspace allows one to insist that god/order is not beyond one's ability to comprehend, control, and reconstitute, either by gaining access to ancient wisdom or through the power of positive thinking.

While, ultimately, this is only an introduction to mystic liberalism, what I hope to have demonstrated in this brief space is the function of this particular variety of liberalism in the American ideoscape of the twentieth century, and the search for tangible answers in response to the perceived and actual failures of God and capitalism during the first half of the twentieth century, as well as confronting the illusory aspects of the American dream. Mystic liberalism attempts to rectify the complexities of these competing notions, acting as a kind of religion-after-religion, but not one that relies on the distant promises of a rewarding afterlife filled with warbling, but on the more immediate promise of a better here and now achieved by one’s own actions. A deeper excavation of this notion would probe the implications for institutions like religion and government and how they transformed as a result, but mystic liberalism is, first-and-foremost, an ideology by and for the masses to help them cope with the rapid changes brought on by the twentieth century and a desire to escape a sense of obligation to the institutions that had lost relevance, even if their core tenants had not.

With that in mind, an efficient means of understanding mystic liberalism is to consider how it was made available to and perpetuated by the masses, namely through popular art. The comic book industry, the labor for which was almost entirely made up of the children of immigrants and people living on the margins of society, is one such medium for disseminating mystic liberal ideology. A part of the second generation of comic book artists to enter the industry, it was Steve Ditko who would emerge as the one to most effectively present these concepts to his readers. At first, he achieved this almost exclusively visually, and later as a polemicist.

AN UNLIKELY BRIDGE BUILDER

Ditko would not have labeled himself a mystic liberal. In fact, it would be highly unlikely that he would acknowledge allegiance to the labels associated with any one set of political, philosophical, or spiritual ideals. Ditko's initial interactions with the world happened in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, a city where, throughout the early part of the twentieth century, surviving, coping, adapting were the order of the day. In that same social context, where the realities of survival butted against boot-strap American dreams, there existed also belief systems that offered the masses, and those living on the margins, access to the tools that would bring them out of their situation and into something better. They were offered intellectual mechanisms for actualizing better or at least more fulfilling lives. Of those triangulated here, we know for certain that Steve Ditko was, at minimum, drawn to and influenced by Ayn Rand's Objectivism. In spite of the distance he placed between himself and Rand, his open acknowledgement of his application of some of her ideas is well documented in works he published through independent outlets and co-published with Snyder. He has not publicly admitted to an interest in the occult in the same way, but close scrutiny of his work speaks to its influence.[86]

It's difficult to say what specifically brought Ditko to an interest in Objectivism. And with the exception of George B. De Huszar's *The Intellectuals: A Controversial Portrait* (1960), I was not able to uncover any documentation where Ditko reported on precisely what influential books he read and when he read them.[87] Further, there are no external, verifiable accounts that provide convincing insight into what or when that moment was. Stan Lee has claimed that it was he who first introduced Ditko to Rand, and this version of events goes unchallenged in Blake Bell's unauthorized Ditko biography *Strange and Stranger*.[88] However, anyone even mildly familiar with Lee's self-aggrandizing and hagiographic approach to his own life knows to take this account with not even a grain of salt—maybe it's true; most likely it's not, or its credulity is at least strained. If one were forced to speculate, it may be that Ditko was first exposed to Rand through *The Fountainhead*, like many of his generation, or perhaps he saw the novel's film adaptation, or perhaps he attended an NBI seminar in New York (which there is unconfirmed, anecdotal evidence of), or, more likely, a combination of those things. We simply don't have the documentary evidence to say precisely when it happened at this point.

What we can argue with certainty is that explicitly Objectivist themes first began to appear in *The Amazing Spider-Man* where, in issue #21, an Objectivist letter-writer complains about (and likely misreads) the depiction of J. Jonah Jameson in issue #10. Ditko was plotting the comic, as he did with all of his collaborations with Stan Lee, and a Randian approach to the hero is inscribed all over both Spider-Man and the "Master of the Mystic Arts," Dr. Strange, during this period in the early 1960s in a way that does not appear in his earlier work. By the time Ditko leaves Marvel and is producing new superhero work for Charlton Comics in 1966, Objectivism is one of the components of his work, and new characters, like The Question, not only parrot Randian vocabulary but even look like Rand's heroes—Vic Sage, The Question's alter-ego—is a dead ringer for Howard Roark, right down to the gaunt facial structure and red hair, again suggesting that *The Fountainhead* was an influential text for him.

Prior to the early 1960s, Ditko's work does not specifically engage with Objectivist thought in any discernable ways. However, it does demonstrate a clear interest in karmic retribution and interiority, which will be more thoroughly explored in the coming chapters as "dark karma" and "cosmic intraspace," respectively. Like Objectivism itself, these terms pair well with both Blavatsky's karma and New Thought's internal search for self-empowerment. In place of an outright conversion to Objectivism, like Nathaniel Branden's, it seems more that Ditko took his existing imagination of justice, the self, and psychological development and layered Objectivism over the top of it all. Because Objectivism became the top layer, and the one most readily perceivable by his readers, it became understood as the defining element of his work—also making questions about conversion possible—when, in reality, he had simply added new words to his existing lexicon. So, if the question is: Is Steve Ditko an Objectivist? the answer is no.

Although he has identified his clear interest in Rand's philosophy, he has been careful never to unambiguously identify himself as an Objectivist. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ditko's interest in Rand is similar to Rand's interest in Aristotle: Rand acknowledges the value and importance of Aristotle to her own work but is specifically not an Aristotelian. She, like Ditko, claims her own set of ethical and philosophic standards, and Aristotle functions as a thin-edge-of-the-wedge to lure people to her way of thinking.[89]

To that end, I argue that Ditko is better understood as a mystic liberal, not because this is a category he would adopt or approve of for himself, but because of the broader conversations in which his work is more comfortably situated. In pivoting away from a closed-system reading where each of his works *must* be contained by Objectivism or right-wing American politics, an application of mystic liberalism invites a more open approach where critiques of Ditko's work is held up to scrutiny against a more complex worldview. Operating as an organic intellectual, Ditko's autodidactic interest in the changing world as it was influenced by Western art and philosophy, also produced work that displays no anxiety about engaging with or employing mystic thought, like the kind found in New Thought, as a means of making philosophic arguments through his art. When Dr. Strange travels into some kind of interior, cosmic intraspace, he does so as a part of a journey to find himself. Likewise, Peter Parker's internal monologue carries a similar weight; Peter combs the landscape of his mind in order to find his sense of self, which he arguably does by issue #33 of *Amazing Spider-Man*.

Regardless of any perceived or actual lack of internal or logical consistency within Objectivist individualism, Steve Ditko's work does maintain a coherent voice that bridges the gap between the occult and mystical thought that permeated Dresser's post-WWI “new age”—an emerging liberal-individualist imaginary that would be adopted as a part of the neoliberal and libertarian movements of twentieth century, most succinctly understood as what I have identified here as mystic liberalism. The consistent, defining thread here is that Rand, Blavatsky, practitioners of New Thought, and other occultists and mystics all argue that whatever invisible forces may exist in the human experience—good and evil, karma, God, the invisible hand—all of these are accessible to the human mind. They are machines that can be observed, dismantled, examined, reconstructed, and put to use as a part of one’s day-to-day existence, not as external forces, but as an internal, individual quest for actualization of one’s own potential.

And as Ditko, Rand, Blavatsky, believers in New Thought, and certainly the neoliberals of the late twentieth century would assure us, a failure to succeed, to make sense of these machines, to actualize our own potential, is our own fault. Mystic liberalism, as we will see it demonstrated by Steve Ditko, allows its practitioners to apply the lessons learned by the immigrants in Johnstown. Survival and progress mean adaptation and coping with hardship, and those changes can only be made, and success achieved, by turning inward: turning each *ought* into an *is*.

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[1] Steve Ditko, "The Exploder," *Charlton Action: Featuring Static, no 12*, December 1985, 5. Emphasis original.

[2] John S. Haller, *The History of New Thought: From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking and the Prosperity Gospel* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation Press, 2012), 16.

[3] Mitch Horowitz, *One Simple Idea: How the Lessons of Positive Thinking Can Transform Your Life* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016), 213. See also, Ronald Reagan, "Ronald Reagan's Announcement for Presidential Candidacy," November 13, 1979, accessed February 10, 2019, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/11-13-79.

[4] Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter* (New York, Cambridge, 1985), 3.

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[5] Morawska 3

[6] Morawska 111

[7] Morawska 101, 267

[8] Morawska 268

[9] Morawska 269-271

[10] Morawska explains that many Slovaks who arrived in Johnstown were members of the German-American alliance, and were often referred to as "German Slovaks," and gave the impression to many of their country-people as believing they were better than other immigrants. Speculatively, this impression was to do with the good relationships and solid connections many Slovaks, who were able to speak fluent German, had with German mill workers at Cambria, thus leading to better paying jobs for these "German Slovaks" at Cambria. Many of these connections were also religiously linked through immigrant-founded churches, particularly Lutheran parishes (109). Although what I write next is highly speculative, this wrinkle in the story of Johnstown immigrants is worth noting because of the Slovak background that the Ditkos claim—the elder Stephen Ditko's job as a master carpenter, and the younger Steve Ditko's distinct references to German thinkers and writers in the story "My Brother..." from 1986. The connections are too tenuous to claim that the Ditkos were specifically a part of this community, especially as Steve Ditko's parents are buried in a Byzantine-Catholic cemetery, but even this would not eliminate the artist's paternal lineage from being a part of a Lutheran, German Slovak community. So, while I am not comfortable making any assertions about the Ditkos' association with such cultural subsets, the superficial connections are difficult to dismiss.

[11] Morawska 103-104

[12] Morawska 85-89

[13] Werner Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York, Oxford UP, 1986), which was released in the year following Morawska's ethnography of Johnstown, makes a different case insofar as he's not interested in the "raw data of the so-called ethnic experience, but in the mental formations and cultural constructions (the codes, beliefs, rites, and rituals which were developed in America in order to make sense of ethnicity and immigration in a melting pot culture" (9). One of the means by which sense is made is through the production of art, and in Sollors's particular case, literature.

[14] Morawska 112

[15] Morawska 117, 132

[16] Related to note 7, Steve Ditko quotes Goethe in "My Brother…".

[17] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a French idealist philosopher and Jesuit priest. A vitalist, de Chardin is perhaps most famous for his conception of the Omega Point, which is the belief that all life is moving towards a divine unification point, which is to say all will become one with God. This unification will be achieved through ever-accumulating spiritual, psychic energy—which he refers to as Radial Energy—and this energy is beyond what can presently be measured by physical means.

[18] Haller, *The History*, 9.

[19] Haller, *The History*, 91.

[20] Haller, *The History*, 191-192.

[21] Haller, *The History*, 33.

[22] Morawska 160, 194, 196, 202

[23] Praxeology is a term first coined in the late nineteenth century but was made popular by Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises in texts like *Human Action*. Broadly, praxeology is the scientific study of human action, from which von Mises gains the title of his book. However, the term is not necessarily applied towards random acts performed by human beings but *purposeful* actions performed by individuals in the service of achieving specific values. For further explication of praxeology, at least as it has been applied by thinkers concerned with liberal political and economic policy, the reader is referred to von Mises's *Human Action* as well as Murray Rothbard's "Praxeology: A Reply to Mr. Schuller" from the December 1951 issue of *American Economic Review.*

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[24] For further exploration of this perspective, in addition to the works of Ayn Rand cited here, the reader is also referred to monographs more sensibly engaged with economic theory. From the Chicago school of economics, consider Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* (2002 ed.), and from a revised Austrian perspective, consider Murray Rothbard's *Anatomy of the State* (1974) and *Man, Economy, and State with Power and Market* (2009).

[25] See Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America* (New York, Bantam, 2009), 11-41. Horowitz traces a history that begins with the Shakers and literal, fundamentalist readings of Christian Scripture by the Millerites as it moves past Miller's failed Apocalyptic prophecies into increasingly mystical and magical approaches to Christianity, Swedenborgians like the man-*cum*-tall-tale John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed), to Mesmerism and Andrew Jackson Davis, to Henry Steel Olcott—a history of American mystics that opens in the rural American Northeast and spread its way westward throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[26] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (New York UP, 1992), 1.

[27] James Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (La Salle, Open Court, 1976), 13.

[28] Webb 14

[29] One of the specific challenges made is to the connection between the Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky and Nazism. Both Lachman and Horowitz do acknowledge that Nazis did appropriate many occult symbols and adopted what Lachman calls a traditionalist mode of esoteric and occult thought; however, both are also strongly opposed to the notion that Blavatsky would have aligned herself with any substantive element of Nazi ideology, such as racism, antisemitism, or the notion of a one-world regime. However, both Lachman and Horowitz do acknowledge that Nazis did appropriate many occult symbols and adopted what Lachman calls a traditionalist mode of esoteric and occult thought.

[30] See Paula Rabinowitz's *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street* (2016), in which she makes a thorough and compelling case for how increasingly mobile post-War Americans were exposed to challenging new ideas and reflections through mass-produced, inexpensive pulp paperbacks to an increasingly literate population.

[31] I am, of course, invoking the language of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci offered in his prison writings during his captivity by Mussolini's fascist regime. Given the propensity for capitalism and an application of neoliberal and libertarian politics by the mystic liberals I describe in this book, it is extremely unlikely that any such person would deliberately invoke or cite a Marxist theorist. However, Gramsci's language is particularly useful as it describes a group of intellectuals who are not credentialed by the ruling classes and instead articulate the experiences of the masses—a certain kind of common sense. Indeed, mystic liberals frequently rely on such messaging, distancing themselves from what they imagine to be the hegemony of academic and political elites, identifying themselves as an excluded minority. In *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, Rand invokes this kind of language when she writes that, "the smallest minority on earth is the individual" at the end of her essay, "America's Persecuted Minority: Big Business." Furthermore, it is worth noting many of the American mystics identified by Horowitz, Lachman, and others were, in fact, leftists, Marxists, and communists, like Christian Socialist Wallace Wattles—Lachman and Horowitz often apply the term "liberal" here, but it is not in the same register in which I am using that term. So, it is with intentional nuance and advisedness that I refer to Gramscian language and believe it to be the most appropriate for the purposes of this study. For convenient reference, the reader might consult Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (2014), edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith.

[32] Horowitz, *Occult America* 46-47, my emphasis.

[33] Mitch Horowitz, "Mitch Horowitz: HP Blavatsky versus Darth Vader," Theosophical Society, YouTube, 18 July 2016, https://youtu.be/dKdaoWOrAnQ.

[34] Interestingly, Lippard's story was later appropriated by Theosophists, and then passed along to Manly P. Hall who repeated the story as a matter of Theosophic truth in *The Secret History of America* (1944). This story was then repeated numerous times by Ronald Reagan as a part of his speeches, and Reagan

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published his version of the story, complete with Hall's Theosophic context, as an essay for *Parade Magazine* in July of 1981.

[35] Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 131-32, emphasis original.

[36] Mitch Horowitz's *Occult America* and John S. Haller's *The History of New Thought* (Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 2012) are useful starting points for disentangling this history. Horowitz's *One Simple Idea* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2016) also presents a focused look at the movement and its contemporary implications.

[37] Horowitz, *Occult America* 83

[38] For example: In his chapter titled "Aristotle's Logic" from *A History of Western Philosophy* (2005 ed.), Bertrand Russell provides a thorough analysis of the categorical problems not addressed by Aristotelian logic, particularly arguing that notions like Aristotle's law of identity (A is A, for Rand and Ditko) fall apart once a predicate is deployed as a part of a syllogism. For Russell, engaging with an Aristotelian system is "wasting [one's] time." However, he notes the staying power of Aristotle in Western thought up to the contemporary moment, lamenting that, "Throughout modern times, practically every advance in science, in logic, or in philosophy has had to be made in the teeth of the opposition from Aristotle's disciples."

[39] This was true even in libertarian and anarchistic intellectual circles of the mid-twentieth century. For further examination of this criticism of Rand from her would-be audience, see Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism* (New York, PublicAffairs, 2008).

[40] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York, Plume, 1999) 1170—1171.

[41] See the previously noted *Radicals for Capitalism* as well as Jeff Walker, *The Ayn Rand Cult* (New York, Open Court Publishing, 1998); Adam Weiner, *How Bad Writing Destroyed the World* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2016); Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York, Oxford UP, 2011); Anne Conover Heller, *Ayn Rand and the World She Made* (New York, Anchor, 2010); Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen (eds.), *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand* (Champaign, University of Illinois P, 1987); David Kelley, *The Contested Legacy of Ayn Rand* (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2000); and Michael Shermer, "The Unlikeliest Cult," *Why People Believe Weird Things* (New York, Holt, 2002).

[42] Many of these are self-published works and range from the interesting, like Peter Saint-Andre's *The Tao of Roark* (Parker, Monadnock Valley Press, 2013), to more obtuse and strained work like Morgan Rosenberg's *Dark Buddhism* (CreateSpace, 2011).

[43] Rachel Weiner, "Paul Ryan and Ayn Rand," *The Washington Post*, 13 August 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/what-ayn-rand-says-about-paul-ryan/2012/08/13/fd40d574-e56d-11e1-8741-940e3f6dbf48_blog.html?utm_term=.bd6c335ef96b

[44] Nemo, "Satanism and Objectivism," *The Church of Satan,* Accessed 8 April 2018, https://www.churchofsatan.com/satanism-and-objectivism.php

[45] William Thomas, "What is the Objectivist View of Reality (Metaphysics)?" *The Atlas Society,* Accessed 8 April 2018, https://atlassociety.org/objectivism/atlas-university/what-is-objectivism/objectivism-101-blog/5485-what-is-the-objectivist-view-of-reality-metaphysics

[46] The origins and nature of Smith's "invisible hand" are contested among scholars; however, Peter Harrison has made a compelling case for the religious origins of the term and that Smith's earliest readers would have understood the term in that spiritual context. See: Peter Harrison, "Adam Smith and the History of the Invisible Hand," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, no. 1 (2011): 29-49.

[47] Wattles was a prominent New Thought writer and minister who authored a trilogy of books entitled *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910), *The Science of Being Great* (1910), and *The Science of Being Well* (1910), along with other titles like *How to Get What You Want* (1907) and *How to Promote Yourself* (1915). Wattles, however, was a Christian socialist and believed that harnessing the power of the mind could/should be used to wipe away the robber barons of industry, creating more egalitarian society.

[48] Horowitz, *Occult America*, 81.

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[49] See Stirner's *The Ego and His Own.*

[50] According to the *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, "a 'whim' is a desire experienced by a person who does not know and does not care to know its cause" (http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/whims-whim-worship.html). Further discussion of "whims" can be found in Rand-penned work such as "The Objectivist Ethics" (*The Virtue of Selfishness* 14), "Philosophic Detection" (*Philosophy: Who Needs It?* 19), and "Galt's Speech" (*For the New Intellectual* 149). The relation to this usage to Stirner, as of this writing, remains somewhat oblique to me, and I'm not certain of its merit or if it has any at all.

[51] See Nathaniel Branden's 1962 essay "Counterfeit Individualism" in Ayn Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 158-161. Rand herself never directly engages with Stirner, and this is the only time Stirner is specifically referenced in non-fiction books produced by the Ayn Rand Institute. Many of these books, like the ones referenced here, are collections of essays that originally appeared in *The Objectivist*, Rand's newsletter.

[52] One might also be tempted to invoke Jung's mining of the unconscious, which may also have some interesting results for thinking about someone like Steve Ditko, rendering him as a kind of ghost hunter, searching for the self. However, given Ditko's apparent interest in German thinkers, egoism, and Stirner's invocation by Nathaniel Branden in "Counterfeit Individualists," Stirner's "ghosts" seem, at least for this particular question, to be a more prudent example for considering Ditko's work. And, for what it may be worth, Stirner's ghosts also position Ditko as a kind of ghost hunter as well.

[53] *The Ego and His Own* p. 96; emphasis original.

[54] *The Virtue of Selfishness* p. 158.

[55] It is also worth briefly mentioning that post-9/11 Objectivists sought to merge Rand's philosophy with Eastern mysticism and philosophy, producing bizarre texts like Mark Rosenberg's *Dark Buddhism* and the more interesting, if not compelling, *Tao of Roark* by Peter Sainte-Andre. Of further interest is that occult historian Mitch Horowitz also counts himself as an admirer of both Rand and Ditko, and frequently uses his Twitter account to extol the virtues of New Age thought and both the Randian and Ditkovian brands of Objectivism.

[56] See: "Mysticism," *The Ayn Rand Lexicon*, http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/mysticism.html

[57] See Rand's "The Objectivist Ethics" in *The Virtue of Selfishness* p. 13.

[58] See Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York, Signet, 1964) 14.

[59] Rand "The Objectivist Ethics" 14

[60] Horatio Dresser, *A History of the New Thought Movement* (McAllister Editions, 2015) 4.

[61] Dresser 4

[62] Dresser 3

[63] Dresser 3

[64] Dresser 68

[65] Dresser 68

[66] Ditko, *Avenging World* p. 1

[67] Dresser 67

[68] Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* 23; emphasis original

[69] This is also precisely the kind of reasoning that placed *The Secret* (another book deeply indebted to New Thought) under attack, and with good reason.

[70] Begrudging-Rand biographer Jeff Walker compares NBI to Bhagwan Rajneesh's cult. See *The Ayn Rand Cult* pp. 141-176.

[71] *The Ayn Rand Cult* p. 144

[72] Ibid. pp. 153-154

[73] Ibid. pp. 160-164

[74] Ibid. 164

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[75] See Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America*

[76] In the "About the Author" appendix to *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand went so far as to claim that she had no philosophic influences or antecedents aside from Aristotle, with whom she was quick to point out she didn't always agree.

[77] Webb 16

[78] For further consideration of this the evolution of neoliberalism as an intellectual matter, see: David Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism* (Harvard UP, 2015). Some of the most significant criticism of neoliberalism, thus leading to expanded use of the term, comes from the work of Michel Foucault, see: Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collége de France, 1978-1979* (Picador, 2010), 217-219.

[79] "Individualism," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed March 2, 2019, http://www.oed.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/view/Entry/94635?redirectedFrom=individualism#eid.

[80] "Google Books Ngram Viewer: Individualism," chart, in *Google Ngrams*, accessed March 2, 2019, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=individualism&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cindividualism%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Cindividualism%3B%2Cc0.

[81] See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America and Two Essays on America* (New York, Penguin, 2003).

[82] See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays* (New York, Oxford UP, 2015).

[83] C.B. McPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (London, Oxford UP, 1962).

[84] McPherson 263

[85] McPherson's seven propositions for possessive individualism are as follows (pp. 263-264):

I. I. What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others.
II. II. Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those whose relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view of his own interest.
III. III. The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society.
IV. IV. Although the individual cannot alienate the whole of his property in his own person, he may alienate his capacity to labor.
V. V. Human society consists of a series of market relations.
VI. VI. Since Freedom from the wills of others is what makes a man human, each individual's freedom can rightfully be limited only by such obligations and rules as are necessary to secure the same freedom for others.
VII. VII. Political society is a human contrivance for the protection of the individual's property in his person and goods, and (therefore) for the maintenance of orderly relations of exchange between individuals regarded as proprietors of themselves.

[86] In a personal letter to me, dated 13 March 2018, in response to a question about whether he read occult works—specifically Theosophy, New Thought, and a few others—Ditko refused to say whether or not he had read any such works. However, in that same letter, he was careful to acknowledge that artists must do research in order to present items and ideas as accurately as possible, seeming to suggest, albeit obliquely, that he had done just such research.

[87] Russ Mahares, "Steve Ditko: Inside His Studio Sanctum Sanctorum," *Pop Culture Squad* (blog), entry posted March 16, 2019, accessed March 19, 2019, https://popculturesquad.com/2019/03/16/steve-ditko-inside-his-studio-sanatorium/.

[88] *Strange and Stranger* p. 86

[89] For further exploration of this, the reader is referred to Peter Saint-Andre, "Our Man in Greece: On the Use and Abuse of Aristotle in the Works of Ayn Rand," *StPeter* (blog), entry posted 2009, accessed July 30, 2019, https://stpeter.im/writings/rand/aristotle-rand.html. Peter Saint-Andre, a self-identified philosopher who is, at the time of this writing, the Principle Engineer at Mozilla, a non-profit tech firm responsible for the Firefox web browser. Saint-Andre has a decided interest Objectivism who wrote a book significant to my earliest thinking for this study, *The Tao of Roark* (2013). While Saint-Andre does

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have an appreciation for Rand, I am not sure it is reasonable to lump him in with the supposedly "strict" Objectivists, like those at the Ayn Rand Institute. As such, Saint-Andre is also interesting as someone, like Ditko, who has a fondness for many of Rand's ideas but cannot be sensibly understood as a disciple. Instead, Saint-Andre frequently lenses Randian ideas through a more mystical glass.

OVERWHELMED BY A CLOAK OF DARKNESS

DARK KARMA AND COSMIC INTRASPACE IN EARLY DITKO COMICS

By the 1950s, Carnegie, Peale, and Rand had obliquely triangulated a popular, secular interface for mystic liberalism, but, of course, this was not the only site of a subtle, substantial shift in popular culture. This mystic liberal interface became available to an even wider audience when it appeared in one of the most popular mediums of the decade: comic books. The early 1950s were a time of rapid and radical change in the comic-book industry, culminating in the creation and implementation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. The year before the Code took hold of the industry, a young Steve Ditko published his first comics work after moving to New York. In that brief, pre-Code window, working most prolifically in the weird and horror genres, Ditko advanced what would become the narrative and aesthetic trademarks of his career. Ditko developed these visual trademarks while working with a number of writers whose names have largely been lost to history.

In trying to better understand the working relationships between Ditko and whatever uncredited writers he worked with, I consulted with comics historian Robin Snyder, who specializes in cataloging creator credits. After contacting Snyder, who was also Ditko's longtime publishing partner, it became clear that there is good reason to believe that Ditko never actually knew or interacted with the writers whose scripts he brought to life. According to Snyder, "the layout and design, characterization, and so forth" were most likely "the product of Ditko's imagination."[1] However, that does not preclude Ditko from being intellectually or artistically moved by his collaborators, however absent or distant. For example, the first story considered in this chapter, "Day of Reckoning," was written by Carl Memling—who wrote many horror and suspense stories for Charlton—and is perhaps best described as typical of his output at Charlton. "Day of Reckoning," as illustrated by Ditko, features narrative elements found in many of Memling's stories, regardless of which artist was interpreting and illustrating them.

For study of the work and ideas presented by Steve Ditko, the consistency of plot points in Memling scripts is less significant than the two following points. First, these themes were already a part of the larger milieu of comics and popular media, and their manipulation by Ditko is in line with his treatment of other pre-existing tropes. Second, they are an entry point for Ditko to begin experimenting with such ideas *visually* in his own, later comics work, putting a finer point on their philosophic potential. Moreover, it should also be noted that many of the narrative elements highlighted in this chapter might easily be found in other horror and suspense comics of the 1950s—both before Ditko and independent of his influence. As such, it would be in error to presume that Ditko had total, original creative agency over the deployment of either "dark karma" or "cosmic intraspace;" hints at and variations of these ideas can be found in a number of other comics, and certainly throughout the work of Carl Memling. What is of significance is that, as Ditko begins working with the elements found in these early stories, they lay a groundwork for an artistic and philosophic trajectory that transcends this period in his career, gradually taking on a life of their own in his oeuvre. This trajectory supports Snyder's assertion about Ditko's relationship with many of his early collaborators, but early on, it seems fair to acknowledge that Ditko was likely playing with prefabricated ideas before taking more of the reins in his freelance work.[2] As Ditko developed his visual approach, he defied many of the norms of the science fiction and horror genres, and his work during this period might be best classified as a kind of comic book "weird fiction."

Citing H. P. Lovecraft, writers Ann and Jeff VanderMeer identify "weird fiction"[3] as a narrative form that "represent[s] the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane," and as marked by "a 'certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread' or 'malign and particular suspension or defeat of…fixed laws of Nature.'"[4] Working very much in this vein, Steve Ditko developed cosmological forces of dark karma and cosmic intraspace that are at the root of a mystic liberal outlook, and were the philosophic tenets and narrative conventions that dominated his creative output throughout his lifetime and into his posthumously published works. Focusing primarily on "dark karma," this chapter will introduce and define both concepts as well as demonstrate how early in Ditko's career these notions took hold and cooperated to create a consistent narrative voice. Although it is the force of "dark karma" that dominates Ditko's early work, the introduction of "cosmic intraspace" and the related notion that psychological terror, struggle, and triumph are distinctly internal matters complicate Ditko's work in a unique way within the weird fiction tradition. This complication not only separates Ditko from the seemingly less introspectively-oriented work of many of his predecessors and contemporaries, but also demonstrates Ditko's career-long interest in the individual, and that the dangers that threaten both the individual and individualism come not from without but from within. Like the blending of mystic thought with popular, secular sensibilities for other mystic liberals, the motifs of "dark karma" and "cosmic intraspace" would eventually merge with Ditko's interest in Objectivism. Recognizing these tropes in work that predates his interest in Objectivism is critical to developing a coherent reading of Ditko's reflection of American political and philosophic discourse.

Offering more than a close reading of a sample of historically significant comics, the inquiries of this chapter also help to prime Ditko's work to fit within the historical and theoretical conversations about American political discourse that this book takes on. Ditko weaves together a number of occultic, philosophic, and political threads to develop an ideological formation that provides a distinct sense of the ethical and political parameters in which American individuals could and should operate in the middle years of the twentieth century. The introduction of my key terms "dark karma" and "cosmic intraspace" helps establish a vocabulary that will assist in demonstrating the broader implications and applications of the themes embedded within Ditko's work.

Such an application need not be limited to Ditko's output; rather, dark karma and cosmic intraspace are observable in the comic books and popular fiction that followed Ditko, positioning the creator as a lens for understanding the evolution of the American political consciousness in the twentieth century. The most radical of the cultural parameters Ditko introduces in these early works is the granting of "the right to kill,"—the licensing of the hero/vigilante to dispatch the criminally and morally corrupt as he chooses.[5] Such stories were not new to the twentieth century, nor were they limited to narratives exclusively interested in radical individualism, but one of the key points of separation between Ditko's notion of "the right to kill" and its prototypes in dime novels and pulps is a more active employment of a Westernized sense of karma. A benefit of this development is that the inclusion of a karmic element in determining the narrative fates of ne'er-do-wells creates a space where the disparate political leanings of writers and artists converge.

The distinct understanding of karma that informs dark karma and the right to kill was popularized by H. P. Blavatsky in the late-nineteenth century and still had a hold on the American consciousness in the post-World War I and interwar period.[6] Blavatsky played a key role in making karma a part of the American lexicon, and according to occult historian Mitch Horowitz, Blavatsky's first major work, *Isis Unveiled*, "popularized the word *occultism* and made the concept a matter of passionate interest among artists, authors, and spiritual seekers of the Western world—more than it had been any time since [the] Renaissance."[7] After attracting the American public's fascination, and introducing them to her particular sense of Buddhism and Hinduism, Blavatsky explained her sense of karma as being both distributive—thus satisfying leftists, like later popularizers of Theosophy such as Annie Besant—and merciless, which would have satisfied some on both the left and right. Emerging at the same time as Blavatsky's occult teachings were the radical individualist philosophies that were later associated with neoliberalism and libertarianism.[8] It was this new construction of the American individual, eventually led by the writing of Ayn Rand, that provided additional moral and ethical support for those individuals to act as karmic agents of justice, eradicating criminal and otherwise undesirable elements from American society. These networks of thought would not only reveal themselves in the comic books, pulp fiction, and popular media of the mid-twentieth century, but were also key areas of contention in the 1980s, as contemporary cultural producers began responding to and challenging their predecessors.

In comic books, narratives featuring karmic agents appear prominently in Ditko's work, and he utilizes these narrative motifs to justify intellectually the use of extreme violence in the crime, weird, horror, and superhero genres. That Ditko also introduced such agents within the pages of superhero comics proved a significant development in the history of the genre; it was Ditko who returned the "right to kill" to superheroes in the Comics Code Era in 1967's *Blue Beetle* #4 before more fully realizing the concept in a 1973 issue of *Mr. A*.[9] This maneuver directly prefigured the gritty, more violent comics that would dominate the 1980s and 1990s, thus significantly informing the narrative trajectory of the medium during that period. In reconceptualizing how Ditko arrived at that pivotal moment, where superheroes reassume jurisdiction over life and death, it is important to note that the notion of the "right to kill" was not new for Ditko in the 1960s, but was the extension of an ongoing project that began with his earliest work and appears in his motifs of "dark karma" and "cosmic intraspace." I will return to "the right" in chapter three, to show how the two motifs constitutive to its eventual emergence developed early on in Ditko's work; in this chapter I focus primarily on stories Ditko produced for Charlton Comics' anthology series *The Thing*.

WEIRD TALES OF SUSPENSE, HORROR, AND COMEUPPANCE!

Before moving to New York and beginning his career in comics, Steve Ditko was an avid comics reader and had already worked hard to develop his distinctive style.[10] Ditko was a product of comics' Golden Age,[11] and during the time he was doing most of his reading, the comic book industry was under increasing scrutiny from parent-teacher organizations and other guardians of culture. This increasing scrutiny was partly due to a sense of nostalgia for the newspaper "funnies" before the comic book, as a format, became a significant form of escape for young readers. However, it was not nostalgia alone that made parents distrustful. The brutally violent crime comics that followed and mimicked *Crime Does Not Pay* contributed to the increasing concern, and by 1948, the National Education Association, along with parents' groups, was already calling for the federal government to regulate the comics industry.[12] It was during this same period that Bill Gaines took over EC Comics from his father, Max. Upon taking over the company, Bill Gaines became determined to create a new trend in comics and immediately jumped on the crime comics wave that followed the success of *Crime Does Not Pay*, and by 1950 Gaines had begun producing horror titles. Under Bill Gaines, EC embraced the horror genre and weird fiction elements found in Lovecraftian and post-Lovecraftian pulp stories, merging them with biting social commentary on war, anti-Semitism, racism, and lynching, among other social and political concerns. Gaines's radical departure from his father's line-up of kids' comics and Bible stories was successful, and like the wave of crime comics that followed Lev Gleason Publishing's *Crime Does Not Pay*, the success of Gaines's horror comics began a new trend in the comics industry, and by 1954, there were more than forty different horror comics titles being printed every month, from a variety of publishers.[13]

Many of Gaines's imitators were able to find financial success by adopting the horror and weird fiction genres, and they provided a platform on which many young artists could cut their teeth. Among those young artists was Steve Ditko, whose first published work appeared in the romance title *Daring Love* issue #1 in 1953. Ditko worked in nearly every available comics genre for a range of publishers, but he seemed to be most at home with Charlton Comics, working on their weird fiction, science fiction, and horror titles. Like most comics publishers, Charlton was more interested in sales than anything else, and frequently changed its product line to match current trends. In addition, they offered some of the lowest page rates in the industry.[14] However, for young and adventurous creators like Ditko, the lack of pay was offset by the amount of creative freedom afforded to writers and artists.

Indeed, the editorial latitude offered at Charlton was a significant factor in Ditko's loyalty to the company, presenting as it did both an opportunity for Ditko to cut loose and to work with the stories that inspired him most. Ditko was keenly aware of the cultural and industry-wide importance of the comics produced at EC, and in a 1959 letter to Mike Britt, Ditko wrote: "Today's efforts are a far-cry from those Golden Years of comics – before the code and when EC was setting the standards."[15] This kind of reflexive awareness is worth noting as it emphasizes not just the influential role that Gaines's EC had on the later key creators, but also the role that EC had in helping Ditko set narrative standards in his own weird fiction and horror tales. While the EC stable often utilized weird and psychological horror to deliver distinct sociopolitical messages,[16] Ditko's work grappled with psychological torment and had distinct philosophic undertones that explored issues of morality, individuality, personhood, and interiority.

Part of Ditko's early foray into the horror genre was a four-issue sequence of *The Thing*, a comic that Charlton billed as "Weird tales of suspense and horror!"[17] Ditko's run on the series lasted from issues #12 through #15 (he left the series after contracting tuberculosis and returning home to Pennsylvania to recover). These stories, along with a few others, mark the end of Ditko's work before the implementation of the Comics Code; they are stylistically different from his later efforts, and they represent a period in the artist's career during which he is neither restrained by the Code nor the influence of Objectivism that would become inextricably linked to his work in the late 1960s. While the stories contained within these issues of *The Thing* are not the didactic, philosophic allegories of Ditko's later work, Ditko's visuals for these stories do reveal deep ontological concerns about how abstract concepts, particularly justice, manifest in concrete forms.

In nearly every case, Ditko's art seems to give justice its own kind of agency, rendering it as a dark karmic force that exists only to punish, not to reward. Furthermore, the dark karma that permeates Ditko's early horror work not only fails to reward but also rarely restores innocent victims; instead, it acts as a manifestation of a corrupt cosmos that consumes its own wicked inhabitants. Of course, the kind of karma on display here does not have a one-to-one relationship with karma as it is understood in Buddhist or Hindu contexts. While his later creation of Dr. Strange directly links Ditko to a knowledge of and interest in the occult and Eastern mysticism, there is no reason to conjecture that Ditko was personally interested in Eastern religions or philosophy during the time he worked on *The Thing*. Rather, the forces found here seem more closely linked to the Western conceptualization of karma popularized by Madame Blavatsky and her Theosophist movement.[18]

Whether Ditko was a reader of Blavatsky or closely acquainted with other Theosophists remains unclear as a historical matter, but even if he was not, that Blavatsky's imagination of karma permeated the culture of Ditko's youth is enough to have had some influence upon how he developed the narrative motifs examined here. Moreover, Theosophy appears to have a significant influence over the creation of characters like Dr. Strange, whose master, The Ancient One, seems to reference Theosophy's "Masters of Ancient Wisdom."[19]

In her essays on the nature of reincarnation and karma, Blavatsky offers her Theosophic notion of karma, writing in *The Key to Theosophy* (2016):

> …it [is] the *Ultimate Law* of the Universe, the source, origin, and fount of all other laws which exist throughout Nature. Karma is the unerring law which adjusts effect to cause, on the physical, mental and spiritual planes of being. As no cause remains without its due effect from greatest to least, from a Cosmic disturbance down to the movement of your hand, and as like produces like, *Karma* is that unseen and unknown law *which adjusts*

> *wisely, intelligently and equitably* each effect to its cause, tracing the latter back to its producer. Though itself *unknowable*, its action is perceivable.[20]

Blavatsky expands upon this understanding by explaining the distributive properties of karma, and, because every human being is connected, at least at the spiritual level, we all collectively suffer or rejoice at the hand of karma.[21] Consequently, one can imagine a universe structured both by cosmic punishment and reward, and that, therefore, when a sin is eradicated, the whole of humanity is lifted. However, the collective, distributive nature of karma precludes neither individual punishments for misdeeds nor individual agents of karma. For Blavatsky, karma is only understood through its observable effects—not its originator—and no one can clearly identify the means or motives of that prime mover.

Of equal importance, according to Blavatsky: there can be no ultimate forgiveness of wrongdoing from God. The results of a crime, be it individual or collectively enacted, cannot be obliterated. Instead, a crime has a ripple effect that runs throughout the universe, and there always must be a reckoning—that ripple must run ashore. The cosmos must be put back in balance, and this balance, of course, is achieved through the machinations of karma, which “may be instantaneous, [though the] effects are eternal.”[22] With this merciless cosmic understanding in mind, and because there is apparently no way to deny *how* or *that* karmic justice is meted out, there is plenty of room within this paradigm for individual agents of cosmic/karmic justice to punish criminal actors with extreme prejudice, without even requiring the motive of revenge to justify their actions. Rather, they are acting on behalf of karma, of an imagined sense of cosmic justice.

The dark karma that Steve Ditko offers his readers is an addendum to Blavatsky's conception and is dependent on karma's mercilessness. Ditko presents his readers an *individuated* suffering that results from sin; however, in stories where society or its instruments sin (such as, for example, through corrupt governmental or police action), it is then the whole of a society that collectively suffers. This collective suffering specifically occurs in the story "Doom in the Air."[23] A sheriff allows an accused criminal to be lynched and buried alive without a trial. Later, the U.S. government uses the land where the man was buried to test nuclear weapons. A bomb is dropped on the area, and the radiation reanimates the murdered man. After his resurrection, he begins a reign of terror that specifically targets his tormentors, but because he is radioactive, he uncontrollably poisons and murders everyone in his path, guilty and innocent alike. (figure 3.1) Thus, the significant deviation here between Ditko's dark karma and a more Blavatskian notion of karma is that Ditko's stories are principally interested in punishment for and the cosmic consumption of evil, not a restorative balancing of the scales.

Nevertheless, the two approaches to karma converge again when Blavatsky notes that, "[a]s a general rule, and within certain limits which define the age to which we belong, the law of Karma cannot be hastened or retarded in its fulfillment."[24] Indeed, Ditko's approach is identical. His dark karma is a cosmic force that, once set into motion, must be sated. One of the clearer instances of Ditko's dark karma at work is in "Day of Reckoning," scripted by Carl Memling.[25] The tale takes place in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century in a shipyard and tells of the demise and revenge of Jabez Grimm, a "tight-fisted skinflint" who refuses to pay his shipbuilders what they are owed, thus "cheating [them] out of [their] rightful wages."[26] Such themes of greed contrasted with the notion of "a day's work for a day's pay" persist in Ditko's narratives.[27] By immediately identifying Jabez Grimm as an abusive, dishonest employer who kept his shipbuilders wallowing "in the bitterest poverty,"[28] Ditko suggests that the cycle of violence that will ensue is deserved. While this narrative maneuver may relieve the reader of any discomfort they may feel in witnessing the coming torture of Jabez Grimm, it also reveals that Jabez Grimm is both a product and a perpetuator of a corrupt order who must be punished. One has to wonder how such punishment can take shape without bloodying the hands of the innocent. Dark karma provides a palatable solution for that problem.

After being cheated by Grimm, three shipbuilders conspire to get their revenge on him by first assaulting and kidnapping him. In a key moment in the story, after the assault, the three men decide to rob Grimm — taking more than their earned and deserved wages. After the robbery, the men further seal their fate by torturing Jabez Grimm, tying him up, sewing his mouth shut and then sealing him inside the hull of a newly constructed ship where he eventually starves to death. (figure 3.2) Had they only taken what Grimm owed them, the assault—and perhaps even the torture—*might* be counted as a kind of vigilante justice and thus a restoration of order. Instead, because they turned to theft—thereby revealing their own corrupt nature—these three men cannot remain agents of a dark karmic force; they must also be consumed by it. It's Ditko's visual insistence on the consumption of evil—bad actors being sucked, dragged, or pulled in to some darkened place—that distinguishes dark karma from its narrative cousins at EC where evil characters receive their comeuppance in manners of all varieties. "Day of Reckoning" provides a useful template for how to identify the visual operations of dark karma.

After murdering and robbing Jabez Grimm, each of the three shipbuilders goes about their days without much thought until, one-by-one, they are mysteriously killed—each grisly death accompanied by a haunting, distant laughter. Of course, it's the ghost of Jabez Grimm terrorizing the three shipbuilders, and the murders are progressively more violent—drowning, crushed by a ship's mast, and near decapitation. When viewed in the light of the dark karmic forces that govern Ditko's narrative, these deaths are necessary to maintain some kind of cosmic consistency whereby a corrupted world consumes its own wicked inhabitants. This notion of consumption is supported by two of three deaths, where in each case the victim enters into and is thereby consumed by dark, interior spaces before meeting his demise. When the ghost of Jabez Grimm takes his revenge on the first shipbuilder, the man gets his leg caught in the chain of an anchor that has dropped on its own, and the man is pulled into the sea where he is drowned. (figure 3.3) The third shipbuilder to die hears the strange, distant laughter of Grimm's ghost and enters into the darkened hull of a ship, where he is murdered off panel. (figure 3.4) Even in the second case, where the man is crushed by the ship's mast, he is frozen in place, unable to jump or move—trapped by the shadow of the falling mast. (figure 3.5) In all three cases, the victims are pulled into a physically darkened place they cannot escape from before being destroyed, and in their individual deaths, there is the perpetuation of a dark order where no real justice is done.

The murder of Jabez Grimm is never solved—or even noticed by the public—and the murderous shipbuilders might have seemed to be free to go about their lives until the supernatural intervention of Grimm's ghost. Moreover, all three of the shipbuilders' deaths are treated as accidents or mysterious happenstances with no effort made to solve the crimes. The implication is that there is no additional human justice to be done because the dark karmic order of the universe is capable of identifying and preventing evil as it occurs; as such, it is up to cosmic and supernatural forces to cleanse the world of its malevolent residents. This cleansing occurs as a result of the world drawing evildoers *into* itself. This bleak outlook that Ditko offers his readers here is not unique to these stories; the tropes and motifs that he develops here recur throughout his work, across genres.

As noted early in this chapter, "Day of Reckoning" presents an interesting problem for linking the notion of dark karma of this story to Ditko. Key to this complication is the fact that many of Memling's scripts for *The Thing*, as well as for other publishers, employ some of the *exact* same plot elements as are found in "Day of Reckoning." A particularly sharp example of this comes from 1953's *The Thing* #8, which includes the story "A Grave Situation," written by Memling and drawn by John Belfi. Briefly, the story is about a treasure hunter who betrays his partners and is then murdered by those partners because of his betrayal. The murderers wrap their victim up in chains and toss him into the sea to drown. (figure 3.6) With his dying words, the treasure hunter curses his former partners, and, sure enough, one-by-one they all die in mysterious accidents. One drowns after the killers' boat capsizes, another is accidentally hung by a swinging rope on the ship that rescues them, and a third is crushed by a falling ship's mast—too paralyzed with fear to move out of the way. (figure 3.9) While trying to remain generous to Memling and the working conditions that might necessitate this kind of repetition, it's clear that he was recycling plots. Based on the plot-repetitio alone, this is disruptive for theorizing dark karma as something distinct to Ditko's work early in his career.

However, I think that Ditko distinguishes his approach to these plot elements and includes a specific aesthetic that will be witnessed in later stories. The claustrophobia and the sense of being swallowed —literally and figuratively—by darkness so readily available in Ditko's panels are not at all apparent in Belfi's version of the story. Specifically, consider the drownings in figures 3.6 and 3.7 as they compare to the drowned victim from "Day of Reckoning" in figure 3.3. In the former, one man is tossed into the sea where he gurgles his way towards bottom and another slips off a boat into the water. In the latter, drawn by Ditko, the victim is *pulled into* the sea and engulfed by it. This, seems to me, is an important distinction in how these deaths are portrayed and how they are understood: I argue that Ditko's visually emphasizes the deliberative nature of the death by extra-human forces in a way not found in the Belfi version of story. Similarly, when comparing the victims crushed by falling masts, both are trapped in the shadow of the mast as the darkness covers their bodies, but in the Ditko version in figure 3.5, the victim is shown, like the drowned one, as having been swallowed, concealed by the cause of his death. This is not true of the Belfi story. As I note in the opening of this chapter, it is not that I believe Ditko is the sole originator of the dark karmic forces that permeate these stories, but his visual stamp is unmistakable when compared to other artists working in the same moment, within the same zeitgeist, and from, essentially, the same script. It's understandable—even expected—that other writers and artists in comics have similar interests, narrative and philosophic—especially as many worked their way through comics studios, as Ditko did, first with Jerry Robinson and then in Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's studio. However, the visual flourishes Ditko adds to each of these early stories for *The Thing* provide a particular narrative flavor that is observable throughout his career.

As a brief example of how this swallowing up of evil appears in other genres and later work, take for example "Kill Vic Sage!," a Question back-up feature that appeared in *Blue Beetle* #4 in 1967.[29] By this time, Ditko had read Ayn Rand's Objectivist novels and had begun applying his own brand of Rand's philosophy to his work. Intriguingly, Ditko appears to have weaved his previous interest in a Dark Karmic order with the alleged hyper-rationality of Objectivism, and "Kill Vic Sage!" is an excellent example of the merging of these two intellectual prospects. At the end of the story, The Question has kicked two violent criminals into the rushing waters of a sewer, refusing to save them from drowning, assuring them that their inevitable deaths are fates that they have earned.[30] Just like the shipbuilders in "Day of Reckoning," there is no legal justice for these criminals, there is no restoration of order (only a removal of evil), and, like the shipbuilders, The Question's victims are swallowed by the dingy, dark tunnels and darker waters of the sewer—the corrupt world consuming its own vile inhabitants.

While the majority of his early weird fiction and horror stories are invested in visually demonstrating the world as a corrupt and perverse place, a place where the only chance for salvation lies in the wholesale extermination of evil, Ditko does *occasionally* offer clemency to, but not restoration of, moral innocents. One such instance of the clemency afforded by dark karma is in the story "Library of Horror"[31]—a story that also provides early insight into how dark karma entangles with cosmic intraspace. "Library of Horror" achieves such an entangling by confining the motivations for evil and the punishment by dark karmic forces within interior, often claustrophobic, spaces.

First printed in *The Thing* #13 in April 1954, this story introduces readers to struggling author Ken Rolland, who craves greatness and is "willing to kill for it."[32] In addition to confronting the story's visual elements, the reader also encounters several key motifs that surface throughout Steve Ditko's career: dark karma, greed, and lust for the unearned. Ken Rolland works for a pulp magazine publishing weird fiction, and one night after receiving some harsh criticism from his editor, Rolland takes to the darkened city streets to clear his mind and find some inspiration. While out wandering the city, Rolland comes upon a strange-looking bookshop that seems to be beckoning him inside. Once he reaches the shop's front door, he's greeted by a haggard and shriveled shopkeeper who informs Rolland that he is always looking for "special customers"[33] like him and that the store is a library of horror novels and ancient mystical texts. However, if Rolland wants access to the store's inventory, the price is a human soul. The shopkeeper promises Rolland the ability to "*enter* the world beyond" so that he can write about the experience he has in that unknown space.[34]

In addition to the challenging narrative that Ditko's art presents,[35] it is also an early instance where he begins to develop his sense of pacing through complex and dense panel layouts designed to create a sense of claustrophobic anxiety. Within those dense layouts, Ditko utilizes an exceptional amount of detail to close the interior space of each panel, with depictions of cluttered bookshelves and narrow alleyways, as well as cosmic intraspaces full of tangled, tentacled negative space. (figures 3.9, 3.10, and 3.11) Ditko's narrative and visual tactics, along with his formal use of negative space and zip-a-tone, pushed the printing capabilities of the notoriously cheap Charlton press to their limit; however, they exemplify the cosmic, claustrophobic terror that would become the hallmark of Ditko's horror work throughout his career.

Desperate and greedy for success that he is unwilling to earn by means of his own mind and labor (a classic sign of moral weakness in Ditko's work), Rolland agrees to bring the old shopkeeper a soul. By bringing the shopkeeper bodies, dead or alive, Rolland gains access to the horror library and its bizarre collection of ancient tomes and books of the dead, all of which, he believes, will help him to write the kinds of stories that will bring him fame and fortune. Rolland's access to these forbidden grimoires demonstrates, in one sense, his desire to reach beyond into the unknown and retrieve some kind of self-serving power. In a Lovecraftian sense, studying such books is an invitation to be destroyed by an ancient and terrible force from beyond human understanding—an unknowable horde of denizens from without. Ditko offers an alternative, where the great and terrible secret of these texts lies not in the outside world but in a world within: within the texts themselves, and within the mind of the reader.

Agreeing to the shopkeeper's demand to bring him a dead body, Rolland stalks a "dirty, littered alleyway" and comes across a "derelict" whom he promptly strangles before delivering the corpse to the shopkeeper.[36] Key to this scene is not just that Rolland is so consumed by his lust for fame that he is willing to commit murder, but that his victim is described in such base terms. It's not a human being that Rolland murders, or even a homeless person, but a *derelict* living in a filthy alley. While Rolland is most certainly the villain in this case, one observes Ditko's dark karma once again at work—the expunging of another undesirable figure from the world.

After bringing his first victim back for the shopkeeper, Rolland is granted permission to peruse the library. Shortly after he begins reading, Rolland is literally pulled into a book, sending him to a world beyond his own through a tangled nightmare passage. This tentacle-like hallway leads Rolland to a cavern where sees a host of demonic figures devouring the soul of the murdered derelict. Taking advantage of the scene, Rolland writes down everything he sees, and when he returns to the ordinary world, he puts his notes in narrative form, selling the story and achieving great success. Tempted by the fame and attention from that story, Rolland murders again and again, delivering each victim to the shopkeeper, with every victim granting the author continued access to the world beyond and an infinite supply of narrative material that he was not able to conceive on his own. It is not clear that all of Rolland's victims after the first were similarly dehumanized, but without details surrounding their characters, it is the first victim, the derelict, that gives the reader the clearest insight into Ditko's worldview.

What separates "Library of Horror" from the kind of dark karma that runs through the remainder of Ditko's contributions to *The Thing* is that this story features both an innocent victim and the restoration of that victim by means of a literal resurrection. There is no other instance of this kind of restorative justice in Ditko's pre-Comics Code horror stories. In fact, many stories, like "Doom in the Air" (also written by Memling), involve mass murder with no cap for the body count and no defeat of evil. In another instance, "Inheritance"[37] features an ending where the man trying to stop an evil curse from taking hold is murdered, the curse left unleashed on mankind. Both of these examples appear in *The Thing* #14 and demonstrate that, during this period in Ditko's oeuvre, when tipping dark karmic scales, it is typically in favor of a corrupt, evil order inflicting itself upon the world. That Ditko deviates from his usual narrative in this instance is useful in this reading as, perhaps counterintuitively, it also reinforces the notion of dark karma defined here.

If dark karma's imperative is to employ evil forces not to defeat but to consume other evil forces in a seemingly endless cycle, without specifically rewarding good for its deeds, then "Library of Horror" has utility in establishing this term as a key development in the evolution of Steve Ditko's artistic-narrative voice. The trajectory set forth for Ken Rolland helps establish this utility. After committing an unspecified number of murders to deliver souls to the demons of the shopkeeper's world beyond, Rolland eventually leverages his success as an author into wealth and something resembling a normal life. As a part of that normal life, Rolland gets married and stops delivering souls to the old shopkeeper, thus losing access to his muse in the world beyond. Predictably, after Rolland stops murdering people, his money dries up and he finds himself unable to write well enough to match his previous success. Again, readers face a villain whose major sin is a desire for the unearned, and whose greed will lead to his eventual comeuppance. In the case of Ken Rolland, he again stalks the dark and foggy streets of his city, searching for a victim to deliver to the shopkeeper for one more glance into the cavernous, demonic world beyond, and he finds just such a victim. However, this time Rolland is so wracked with guilt over what he is about to do, he refuses to look at the person's face—again suggesting that there was some methodology to his previous murders and that successive victims were akin to the derelict he first sacrificed. Rolland strangles his victim, a woman, to death and delivers her to the shopkeeper, who sends Rolland on one more trip to the world beyond. In perfect O. Henry fashion, Rolland descends into the nether realm to witness the demons feasting on the soul of his victim only to find out it was actually his wife he unwittingly murdered. Certainly, Ditko has pulled this narrative maneuver right from the EC Comics playbook, but setting up Rolland as someone who lusts after unearned success, and is willing to murder for it, goes a long way in establishing the narrative and philosophic conventions that would define Ditko's later work.

After realizing that his victim was actually his wife, Marion, Rolland rushes in to rescue her and the two narrowly escape from the demonic realm. This escape brings Marion back to life, but unfortunately for Rolland, escaping from the demons means they will have to be satisfied in another way. The shopkeeper allows Marion, an innocent, to live, and in her place it is Ken Rolland who must be sacrificed to the demons and their hunger for human souls. Rolland refuses to submit to the shopkeeper's demand, pulls a gun, and attempts to shoot the shopkeeper. This desperate attempt fails, as the bullets do not affect the shopkeeper, who then reveals his true identity: Death. The story's final panel sees "Ken Rolland scream[ing] out his last, [as] the cloak of darkness overwhelmed him to take him back to the beyond."[38] Within the space of just these last few panels, Steve Ditko has concretized several key aspects of dark karma, set a standard for the pathos that will continue throughout the body of his work, and woven into those two elements the cosmic intraspaces that would become emblematic of his creative vision.

Of course, the dark karmic elements are most clearly established through the fate of Ken Rolland; however, that the shopkeeper is revealed to be Death in human form is telling. By rendering Death as a collector of souls to be fed to demons, the reader is again reminded of the dark karmic forces that haunt the corrupt, human world insofar as Death is both an evil force (insisting on murder and human sacrifice) and also one that acts to remove morally suspect people from existence. To further establish the corrupt nature of the world and of Death, eater of dark souls, Death does not seem to differentiate between evil people and innocent ones, but when confronted with the choice between devouring an innocent (Marion) and a villain (Rolland), Death chooses the villain. That Death makes this choice is intriguing from a narrative standpoint because, by resurrecting Rolland's murdered wife, she is granted her life and freedom but receives no other restitution. There is no real justice done for Marion: she still suffered strangulation at the hands of her husband, she still has no financial prospects after Rolland squandered their funds, and she is utterly abandoned after witnessing Death take Rolland away screaming. There is no additional punishment for Marion, but there is no justice either—thus establishing that the world is a corrupt and unjust place that imposes itself upon the innocent. The only reprieve for the innocent is that the Dark Karmic forces of the world are perpetually in motion, literally and figuratively consuming the world's evil actors.

In addition to this advancement of Ditko's karmic perspective, "Library of Horror" provides readers another early glimpse into Ditko's dark vision for cosmic intraspace. Although it is a theme that would permeate almost the entirety of his oeuvre, Ditko's interest in cosmic intraspace is of course rooted in the weird horror and suspense stories he produced at Charlton in 1954, and "Library of Horror" is a transitional work that integrates the Lovecraftian landscapes associated with his sense of "cosmic intraspace" with lurking dark karmic forces. The kind of psychic and physical space that Ditko renders is unique because of its investment in personal interiority as opposed to the cosmic outer space of many of his peers. In place of the threats, hopes, or infinite beings stationed beyond humanity's ability to see or reach outward towards, Ditko's cosmic intraspace is constantly looking inward: in books, in pocket dimensions, in claustrophobic spaces containing infinite dread, or in the human consciousness. Of course, cosmic intraspace is not limited to these few examples, but they are easily identifiable in any number of weird, suspense, and horror stories where Steve Ditko has left his narrative mark, and they are peculiar to his own narrative, philosophic, and pathological sensibilities.

As an immediate example, one may be inclined to compare the weird and dreadful cosmic intraspace of Steve Ditko's work in a Dr. Strange story to the optimistic and operatic vision of the cosmic found in the superhero work of Jack Kirby, or even in Kirby's horror and suspense stories.[39] Indeed, Ditko's interest in cosmic intraspace similarly adopts different modes and has applicability across genres. While a character like Ken Rolland is subjected to the dark cosmic intraspace that devours the souls of the damned, Dr. Strange encounters Eternity—a character who is literally the whole of the cosmos contained within a humanoid shape.[40] So, too, does Spider-Man, Peter Parker, confront his own intellectual and emotional challenges as a part of an internal monologue that results in radical shifts in his behavior and attitudes.[41]

Ditko's early interest in dark, cosmic, supernatural spaces existing within the ostensible boundaries of the earth is not limited to these stories, and in "Die Laughing,[42] which also appeared in *The Thing* #13, Ditko offers readers yet another glimpse of the kind of cosmic intraspace and claustrophobia that would define his aesthetic. The plot of "Die Laughing" involves college fraternity brothers (a frequently problematic group of individuals in Ditko comics) and the hazing of incoming pledges. The ringleader of the hazing activities, Rex Chandler, is particularly interested in physically and psychologically tormenting the pledges with his seemingly never-ending series of practical jokes. Rex's final test for the pledges is for them to tour a haunted house from top to bottom, and behind a bizarre-looking locked door on the top floor Rex claims to have an especially terrifying prank prepared. Reluctantly, the pledges agree to enter the haunted house, and one by one, each pledge disappears, leaving no hint as to what could have happened to them by the time they reached Rex's final prank. After hearing nothing from the pledges, Rex jokes that maybe they died laughing, and decides to go into the house and drag the pledges out.[43]

Like the pledges before him, Rex never returns, and the remaining fraternity brothers decide to investigate the house. By the time they reach the top floor, the boys discover a large metal door that presumably conceals Rex's final prank. Upon opening the door, Rex is found on his knees, his hair bleached completely white and any sense of youth or robustness ripped away from him, leaving a decrepit shell of Rex's former self. Rex can't articulate what it was he saw in the darkness that left him in this miserable state, and the pledges are never found or heard from. Later, after a more thorough search of the house still reveals no sign of the pledges, Rex dies of "extreme shock," and the authorities burn the house down, as the narrator reports that the pledges "have never been seen again! What strange and horrible fate *engulfed* them will probably never be known."[44]

The plot elements alone refer the reader back to Ditko's dark karma, and while Rex's "crimes" are apparent, the sins of the pledges seem to be their willingness to surrender their own independent minds and actions in exchange for acceptance from their fraternity brothers. Noting again that Ditko was not acquainted with the writing of Ayn Rand at the time this story was published, this kind of plotting certainly pre-figures that interest, and it is an attitude that will be revisited in the earliest Spider-Man stories in 1962 and 1963, which also pre-date Ditko's investment in Rand's philosophy. However, what is key to this story are its visual characteristics. Ditko crams the page with tight-fitting panels, and most of the panel interiors are set at odd angles or are close shots of one or more characters in the foreground. Cluttered, dark, negative space and/or a multitude of sharp edges and jutting angles often surround the panels that have only one character in the foreground. (figures 3.12, 3.13, and 3.14) These visual elements create a sense of claustrophobia, which heightens the terror on the page, but they also work to demonstrate the infinite dread of tightly closed spaces, running in an equal and opposite direction from the exterior cosmic dread conjured up in the works of H. P. Lovecraft. In the case of Lovecraft, the reader is often left with a sense of smallness and inadequacy in the face of an unending and expanding universe, but Ditko's narratives reveal the horror of being crushed by a cosmos that is perpetually closing in, with nowhere to escape.

That the horrors of "Die Laughing" all take place unseen within the enclosed structure of the house is also telling—especially when considering the ways in which Ditko's cosmic intraspace manifests. While the kinds of tangled intraspaces that appear in "Library of Horror" are representative of the more visually striking expression of Ditko's cosmos, "Die Laughing" offers a particular insight into his interest in claustrophobia and, just as importantly, his assertion that the unknown materializes from within, not from without. Specific to this case, the unknown horror that rips away Rex's youth—and eventually his life—is contained within the symbolic darkness of the house and the literal darkness as it is represented on the comic page. The unknown also lurks behind the closed door on the house's upper level, again demonstrating that such cosmic spaces can only be accessed through portals, like the book in "Library of Horror," and how each death in "Day of Reckoning" takes place either inside of something (a boat, the sea) or in the darkness of a shadow. These narrative choices, combined with dark karma, blend together to create a distinct narrative voice and help position Ditko as an artist who is making literary maneuvers in his work, as opposed to purely commercial or financial ones.

To be sure, Steve Ditko was not working in a vacuum and would not want to claim that he was unique in bringing about change to the comics industry. However, Ditko's utilization of narrative concepts such as dark karma and cosmic intraspace to justify the use of extreme violence in comic book narratives intellectually—even in the superhero genre—represents a significant contribution to the comics medium in the United States. What these very early contributions of Ditko demonstrate is more than a primitive version of an artistic style.[45] They represent the introduction of a narrative and philosophic perspective that Ditko refined over a sixty-five-year period. Furthermore, even though Ditko's philosophic perspective adjusted with his experiences and encounters with other writers, the early appearance and persistence of dark karma and cosmic intraspace is evidence of Ditko's intellectual consistency. This kind of intellectual consistency is exceptionally useful in shaping a clear understanding of not just the artist's oeuvre, but of how his contributions influenced his contemporaries.

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[1] The Grand Comics Database (GCD) is an excellent resource for tracking down the names of writers and artists who worked on comics in an era before proper credit was the industry standard. While I hold the GCD in the highest regard, it is, understandably, an incomplete record. I trust GCD's attributions, even if I harbor a small amount of skepticism that it can be perfect in its accuracy at all times. As it relates to this chapter, I am convinced that Carl Memling is correctly credited as the writer of "Day of Reckoning;" and substantive efforts have been made by Martin O'Hearn on his blog *Who Created the Comic Books* to identify Memling's work, identifying stylistic flourishes common to Memling's work. What I am leery is about is crediting any other unidentified writers who worked with Ditko during this period, without some thorough vetting for those attributions. Because my aim is to scrutinize Ditko's specific contributions, I have not engaged in such a thorough vetting for other potential writers on the series. However, I checked in with Robin Snyder, Ditko's longtime publisher and comics historian, to see if he had any information regarding writers Ditko may have worked with in his earliest days. Snyder assured me that neither he nor Ditko had any clear recollection or knowledge (some sixty-plus years later) of who the writers were that would have contributed the scripts for Ditko's earliest comics. This lack of recollection, of course, does not mean that Ditko did not speak with, know, or otherwise explicitly collaborate with writers about how a particular script should be illustrated, but there is simply no reliable information to suggest one way or the other. The result of this ambiguity, for the purposes of this book, is to rely on the visual cues that Ditko provides as markers of consistency throughout his career—regardless of who his collaborators or editors were.

[2] Of particular note should be the clear artistic influence of comics artist Mort Meskin on Ditko's early work. Meskin and Ditko were studiomates at Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's S&K studio in Ditko's early years, and Ditko was a great admirer of his work, adopting much from Meskin's approach to layout and character design. In fact, when he Ditko did the design work for writer Joe Gill's Captain Atom, he plainly swiped Meskin's design for Atoman, whom Meskin had created for Spark Publications in 1946. For further reading on Meskin, readers are encouraged to consider Steven Brower, *From Shadow to Light: The Life and Art of Mort Meskin* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2010).

[3] Literature scholar James Machin further considers the VanderMeers' definition of weird fiction and the implication of its usage in his 2017 article, "Weird Fiction and the Virtues of Obscurity: Machen, Stenbock, and the Weird Connoisseurs." Machin suggests that definitions of the weird, particularly as they eschew other popular elements of horror fiction (e.g. werewolves, zombies, etc.), is done in the service of claiming "cultural value above that normally afforded 'genre' fiction." This distinction, Machin argues, provides weird fiction some sort of cache for a "more educated, cultural elite" to draw from in designating a particular kind of horror and speculative fiction as being a more "nuanced, literary writing." Put differently, identifying a text as "weird" lends a sense of authenticity to both the text and the reader. This is an interesting critique of the emergence of the weird as it's gained popularity in scholarly circles, and it seems to run parallel to the kind of tension that Marc Singer considers in his 2019 book on the ongoing concerns in comics studies, *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies.* As a brief example, Singer notes the anxiety amongst academics concerning what to call comics—comics? graphic novels? graphic narrative? In both cases, it appears that the primary concern is staking out some kind of respectability for the reader/scholar's selected texts. Although I don't think my writing here is afflicted with the kind of anxiety identified by either Machin or Singer, I take their points. However, in terms of the weird and how it is being used in this chapter, I'm less inclined to apply Machin's reading here for at least the reason that the comics Ditko was working on (along with numerous other titles at other publishers and any number of pulp magazines) were identified by the publishers and authors as "weird" in an attempt to differentiate themselves in terms of content more than literary value.

In some cases, not even a content differentiation was at hazard as much as a means of diversifying a product line, even if superficially.

[4] Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, "The Weird: An Introduction," *Weird Fiction Review*, 6 May 2012. http://weirdfictionreview.com/2012/05/the-weird-an-introduction/

[5] See Steve Ditko, *Mr. A,* #1 (1973), 25-33.

[6] See Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: White House Seances, Oujia Circles, Masons, and the Secret Mystic History of Our Nation* (New York: Bantam, 2010), 45-50, 146, 164-165, 186-191, 194.

[7] Ibid., 49, emphasis original.

[8] See Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).

[9] For further exploration of Ditko's introduction of the "right to kill," please see Zack Kruse, "Steve Ditko: Violence and Romanticism in the Silver Age," *Studies in Comics* 5.2 (2014): 344-352.

[10] Ditko, Steve. "Steve Ditko—A Portrait of the Master." Interview by Larry Herndon. *Ditkomania,* no. 24 (June/July 1988): 1-6.

[11] Fully recognizing that "Golden Age" is a contested term with a long history of scholarly and fan debate, I believe it to be appropriate within this specific context as it is a term Ditko himself uses in the interview cited above. Further, it is clear from his references that Ditko means this term to be applied to those comics produced before the implementation of the Comics Code.

[12] For a more detailed examination of this history and the history of the Comics Code, please see: Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Mike Benton, *Crime Comics: The Illustrated History* (Houston: Taylor Publishing Company, 1993); and David Hadju, *The Ten Cent Plague* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

[13] Mike Benton, *Horror Comics: The Illustrated History* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Pub., 1991), 25.

[14] See Jon B. Cooke, "The Action Hero Man: The Great Giordano Talks Candidly about Charlton," *Comic Book Artist* 9 (2000): 30-51, 109 and Randy Duncan and Michael Smith, "The Charlton Comics Story," *The Power of Comics*, http://www.powerofcomics.com/the-charlton-comics-story, for further discussion of Charlton and its history.

[15] Quoted in Steve Ditko, "Introduction," *Strange Suspense*, by Steve Ditko, Edited by Blake Bell. Vol. 1 of *The Steve Ditko Archives*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009, 7.

[16] For a detailed, scholarly look at EC's sociopolitical messaging, particularly as it relates to race, the reader is encouraged to read Qiana Whitted's *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest* (Rutgers UP, 2019). The book provides a convincing analysis of the EC stories known as "Preachies," which appeared in the series *Shock SuspenStories*. While the Preachies took on a variety of sociopolitical issues, the thrust of Whitted's analysis—which includes the reaction of readers—is how the stories addressed the problems of racism and antisemitism in 1950s America. Although this chapter is not substantially engaged with EC enough to warrant a full examination of their line, Whitted's book provides important insight as it relates to considerations of race in comics and provides important insight for the opening section of chapter three.

[17] Ditko, *Strange Suspense*, 46, 63, 142, 171.

[18] Mike Benton also notes Dr. Strange's link to "theosophy" in his 1991 book, *The Illustrated History of Superhero Comics: The Silver Age*. However, there are a few important distinctions to make. First, Benton links "theosophy" and Eastern Mysticism to the dialogue edited by Stan Lee, giving Lee primary consideration in the matter. This is problematic as it does not account for Ditko being responsible for the plotting of Dr. Strange, along with the panel scripts he wrote independent of Lee's influence. Even if one wanted to look at later stories where Lee's editorial demands (discussed in chapter three) made their way into the plots, the character was wholly conceived—and the first two stories were written—by Ditko. Additionally, Benton is using "theosophy" in an entirely different register than it is being employed in throughout this study. Benton's use of "theosophy" implies a wide-range of vaguely Christian beliefs that typically involve a knowledge of God achieved through spiritual ecstasy. Capital-T Theosophy, as it is used by me, refers exclusively to the religious movement founded by H.P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel

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Olcott and explicated in texts like *The Key to Theosophy* and *Isis Unveiled.* Mike Benton, *Superhero Comics of the Silver Age: The Illustrated History* (Dallas, TX: Taylor, 1991), 62-63.

[19] See H. P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (Lexington: Kshetra Books, 2016); H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (Wheatron: Quest Books, 1997); H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2009); Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America*; and K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (Albany: State University of New York P, 1994).

[20] Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 131-32, emphasis original.

[21] Ibid., 133.

[22] Ibid., 149.

[23] Memling, Carl and Steve Ditko. "Doom in the Air," *Strange Suspense*, by Steve Ditko, Edited by Blake Bell. Vol. 1 of *The Steve Ditko Archives*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009, 158-165.

[24] Helena Petrova Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (n.p.: Kshetera Books, 2016), 203.

[25] Memling, Carl and Steve Ditko. "Day of Reckoning," *Strange Suspense*, by Steve Ditko, Edited by Blake Bell. Vol. 1 of *The Steve Ditko Archives*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009, 178-183.

[26] Ibid., 178.

[27] This motif may be most recognizable in the adversarial relationship that Peter Parker has with the grotesquely rendered J. Jonah Jameson in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Greed and cheapness is always a signifier of moral corruptness in Ditko's oeuvre. One may be tempted to apply a Marxist critique of capital and labor here, but such a reading would be significantly complicated by the recurrence of this motif in Ditko's later work, which is deeply invested in an Objectivist imagination of capitalism in the late twentieth century.

[28] Memling and Ditko, "Day of Reckoning," 178.

[29] This issue and its historical impact are considered more extensively in an earlier work on Ditko's contributions to the superhero genre, later in this book and in my youthfully composed article for *Studies in Comics*, "Steve Ditko: Violence and Romanticism in the Silver Age."

[30] Ditko, Steve, and Steve Skeates. "Kill Vic Sage." In *Action Heroes Vol. 2*. The DC Archive Editions. New York: DC Comics, 2007, 269-276.

[31] Ditko, Steve. "Library of Horror," *Strange Suspense*, by Steve Ditko, Edited by Blake Bell. Vol. 1 of *The Steve Ditko Archives*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009, 64-70.

[32] Ibid., 64.

[33] Ibid., 65.

[34] Ibid., 65, emphasis added.

[35] Current records do not identify a potential writer for the story.

[36] Ibid., 66.

[37] Ditko, Steve. "Inheritance," *Strange Suspense*, by Steve Ditko, Edited by Blake Bell. Vol. 1 of *The Steve Ditko Archives*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009, 166-170.

[38] Ditko, "Library of Horror," 70.

[39] For a thorough and engaging examination of the comics work of Jack Kirby, the reader is urged to consider: Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012).

[40] Ditko, Steve and Stan Lee. *Essential Doctor Strange*, Direct ed., New York: Marvel Comics, 2001.

[41] Ditko, Steve and Stan Lee. *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Marvel Omnibus, New York: Marvel Comics, 2007.

[42] Ditko, Steve. "Die Laughing," *Strange Suspense*, by Steve Ditko, Edited by Blake Bell. Vol. 1 of *The Steve Ditko Archives*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009, 71-77.

[43] Ibid., 75.

[44] Ibid., 77, emphasis added.

[45] For a more detailed reading of the presentation of violence in Ditko's work, see Kruse, "Steve Ditko: Violence and Romanticism."

"'TWAS STEVE'S IDEA"

A SECRET RACIAL HISTORY AND A SEARCH FOR THE SELF IN DR. STRANGE

Dr. Strange is East Asian. Was Asian. Is still kind of Asian? It's hard to say, except that it wasn't, and then it was. (figure 4.1)

In 2016, the controversy surrounding the Dr. Strange film adaptation was the whitewashing and political erasure of Tibet in the film by casting Tilda Swinton as The Ancient One, a character depicted in the Dr. Strange comics as an elderly Tibetan man. This would be troubling enough, but no one seemed concerned about the casting of Benedict Cumberbatch in the film.[1] And why would they? Dr. Strange had been depicted as unquestionably Western and white ever since Steve Ditko left the character in 1966. Of course, the focus of the present study is on the development and dissemination of mystic liberalism, but ignoring the issue of race in Dr. Strange, particularly as envisioned by Steve Ditko, leaves any analysis of the character incomplete. My intent with the following brief consideration of race in Dr. Strange is not to develop sustained argumentative claims about the racial attitudes of those working in the Marvel offices in the 1960s.

There are a number of other critical texts taking on the issues of race and representation in American comics, particularly as it pertains to African Americans,[2] and a number of recent comic books and graphic novels have addressed the issue of Asian American representation. Cartoonist Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, for example, is a powerful and important meditation on racism, representation, and Asian American life. Similarly, journalist Jeff Yang has compiled the comics anthologies *Secret*

Identities (2009) and *Shattered* (2012), which feature comics from Asian American cartoonists. Jeff Yang's volumes adopt the conventions of traditional comics genres in order to disrupt pervasive stereotypes and, like Gene Luen Yang, give voice to the lived experiences of Asian Americans. A sustained inquiry into Asian representation in American comics is vitally important to Comics Studies, particularly as it relates to how that representation has occurred over time and an historical consideration of publishing practices. Without such a study, at the time of this writing, there is not substantial enough evidence to make significant, supportable claims about how the attitudes of specific people in the Marvel offices affected the production of Dr. Strange, or how he has been presented in the decades following Steve Ditko's departure from the character.

What is supportable by existing evidence is that Ditko intentionally designed the visuals, plotted, and wrote the first Dr. Strange story with an East Asian man in mind. I'm most confident about this because I put the question of Strange's race to Ditko in a 2014 letter, to which he responded: "The answer is seen in the first published Dr. Strange story." That's all he said. Some may gain the mistaken impression that Ditko's response is not direct enough to eliminate any debate about the character's origins, but I don't think that's the case at all. Rather, it seems clear to me that the character's intended, original race was unambiguous to Ditko. In Ditko's rendering, Doctor Strange is tall and lank, his hair is thick and dark, he has heavy-lidded and narrow eyes, angular eyebrows, and his skin tone is a light beige. However, it is not as though all East Asian characters have an exclusive set of phenotypical traits, but these design choices are in line with other the depiction of other, earlier, East Asian characters that seem to inform the way the cast of Doctor Strange's stories were illustrated, including characters like Ming the Merciless from *Flash Gordon* and Stuff the Chinatown Kid, the sidekick from DC Comics' Vigilante stories of the 1940s.[3]

Any ambiguity surrounding Strange's race came well after Ditko's invention of the character and the publication of his first appearance in 1963's *Strange Tales* #110. What a response like this also illustrates is Ditko's commitment to the idea that his work stands on its own, separate from himself, and any intention and related meaning is made clear by him, through the work—visually and narratively. I take Ditko seriously on this point, and debates about authorial intent notwithstanding, this is important to take into consideration because it leads to the conclusion that building a sound reading of Ditko's work means first deciphering and contextualizing the visual elements he presents.

What is also clear is that the decision to render Dr. Strange as East Asian, or at least of Asian descent, is an important and progressive one. That Asian characters had previously appeared in heroic roles in American comic books and pulp fiction is not contested: Green Hornet worked with Kato, Crimson Avenger with Wing, Blackhawk with Chop-Chop, Stuff saddled up with Vigilante, and spy characters like Jimmy Woo had peppered the superhero landscape from the 1930s forward. But these characters were typically relegated to sidekick status alongside their white counterparts, and even though Jimmy Woo had more of a leading role in his appearances in *Yellow Claw*, he disappeared after *Yellow Claw* ended and was busted down to supporting cast when he re-emerged in Jim Steranko's *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D* in 1967.[4]

Where Ditko separates himself from his contemporaries on matters of representation is that Dr. Strange was the lead character with a largely Asian supporting cast. Whatever problematic elements are evident in his early stories, the matter-of-fact tone with which the character and his race were initially presented avoided some of the more exploitive elements that populated other contemporary comics featuring heroes of color. Although he certainly plays into longstanding tropes and stereotypes about Eastern mysticism—an important component of mystic liberalism's association with Theosophy—Ditko doesn't offer any special pleading for Dr. Strange's race or ethnicity, nor does he embrace racist dialogue affectations to signal Strange's race. In fact, Dr. Strange's Anglicized first name, Stephen, was an invention of Stan Lee's and isn't introduced until *Strange Tales* #115, which presents the character's origin. Incidentally, this is also at a point when Stan Lee had taken more of an interest and stake in the character's development.

It's entirely possible, but unlikely, that Lee did not know Dr. Strange was designed as an East Asian character, which may account for his apparent inability to see the character's potentials. This is possible because Lee was not involved in the character's initial conception. For many readers this might come as a surprise because the credits for the first Dr. Strange story, as printed in 1963, do not properly attribute the whole of the story to Ditko. Rather, Stan Lee is credited as the writer, though in reality Lee was merely the editor. Lee had no input in the initial plotting, scripting, or penciled pages. Dr. Strange, as Lee once dismissed, "'Twas Steve's idea."[5] Ditko "brought in to Lee a five-page, penciled story with a page/panel script of [his] idea of a new, different kind of character for variety in Marvel Comics. [His] character wound up being named Dr. Strange because he would appear in *Strange Tales*."[6]

Naming characters in this way was not particularly innovative and has its roots in the horror-host characters that first appeared in comics in 1942 with *Crime Does Not Pay*'s Mr. Crime.[7] Not only is the character's name in the tradition of the horror-hosts of the past—and like those Ditko worked on at Charlton, such as The Mysterious Traveler in *Tales of The Mysterious Traveler*—there is nothing in the Lee-edited dialogue or narration boxes that specifically states the character's race. This leaves the reader with only Ditko's art to decipher the character's heritage. It is the rendering of Dr. Strange's facial features that clarify his East Asian background, and the depiction of the character—particularly in the costuming and the Cloak of Levitation—draws obvious influence from Alex Raymond's Ming the Merciless from *Flash Gordon*.[8]

In spite of the problematic ways such features had been exaggerated in the comic books and strips of earlier years, the lack of exaggeration by Ditko, the coloring of the character, and the lack of racist dialogue affectations temper specific, racially charged overtones that Dr. Strange might otherwise have borne. Instead, Ditko presents the character with a certain dignity that—like the kinds of heroes Ditko has created throughout his career—needs no justification for his existence. What you see, in a somewhat literal sense, is what you get.

That the issue of race is muddled for Dr. Strange is more telling of the kind of misreading that happened, intentional or not, after other creative voices became involved with the character, especially after Ditko left Marvel in 1966 and other artists and writers took over the development of the character's mythology. Of course, Ditko was not the first comic-book artist to create a character of color, but in terms of the superhero genre, Ditko's approach is an important one that could have set a tone for greater inclusivity in the production of superhero comics if editorial and collaborative decision making had not altered Dr. Strange's initial trajectory. After all, Strange predates Jack Kirby's creation of the Black Panther—who is typically cited as the first hero of color in mainstream comics—by more than three years, but even Black Panther did not star in his own title until 1973's *Jungle Action*.

Meanwhile, Dr. Strange was a feature player in *Strange Tales* until the series was ultimately dedicated to only his adventures and retitled *Dr. Strange* before its cancellation in 1969. Strange eventually returned to regular publication in 1971 in *Marvel Feature*, and then with *Marvel Premier* in 1972, and a Dr. Strange solo-book titled *Dr. Strange: Master of the Mystic Arts*, which ran until 1987. He again received a new title in 1988: *Dr. Strange: Sorcerer Supreme*, which lasted ninety issues and was cancelled in 1996. Excluding a less-than-two-year gap from 1969-1971, Dr. Strange had nearly thirty-five years of consistent publication.

Again, without some kind of documentation, or even an anecdote, there is no way to definitively say precisely who initiated the whitewashing of the Dr. Strange, or if it was a deliberate move, or, no matter how much it strains credulity, if it was an accidental misreading of Ditko's work. There are certainly hints here and there, but no explicit evidence or commentary has yet been revealed. What does appear certain is that the *initial* creation was Ditko alone, and that essays like "He Giveth and He Taketh

Away" make plain that any potential corruptions of the character's initial intent were not from his hand or mind. It's also obvious Ditko believes that the character's intended racial makeup is clear from the first published story, and it is only with the character's origin story that obvious Anglicized elements are added. The reader may draw whatever conclusions they wish from the evidence gathered here, but what remains true is that after Ditko left the character and Marvel in 1966, outside of notable, recent exceptions by Chris Bachalo and Marcos Martín, Dr. Strange has been exclusively depicted as white up to and including the casting of Peter Hooten in a 1978 made-for-TV movie and, of course, Benedict Cumberbatch in the 2016 film adaptation by Marvel/Disney.

BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DAWN

Whereas racial inclusivity is not a clear or exclusive hallmark of mystic liberalism, Dr. Strange offers one of the most profound explorations of cosmic intraspace and its relationship to the development of the individual. While other, more secular explorations of the cosmic interior that each individual contains are readily apparent with characters like Spider-Man, Blue Beetle, The Question, Mr. A, and others, it's Dr. Strange who offers the most direct, literal exploration of that space. This occurs with Strange as he explores his own identity and ascends from the tutelage of his master, The Ancient One, to becoming Sorcerer Supreme through his own incursions of myriad interior worlds. These interior worlds include the minds of others and dimensions beyond, where he must beat back the hordes of mindlessness and even his own evil opposite on his path to self-actualization and enlightenment. Along that journey, Dr. Strange encounters more than just those who fail as liberals by embracing a lust for power over others. He comes face to face with a literal, if heroic and apex, interpretation of cosmic intraspace when he meets the character of Eternity—an entire, sentient universe encapsulated in humanoid form. If there's a character who embodies the qualitative effects of mind power in the shaping of one's own identity and universe, it's Dr. Strange.

In the mystic liberal imaginary, mind power is paramount in establishing individual identity. If a person is not in control of their emotions, if they can't create the foundation for their own innate response to the world, then they run the risk of becoming awash in a sea of grey personlessness. What Dr. Strange, as a series, offers is more than Dalí-esque landscapes. It's through the embrace of those surrealist interior spaces that Ditko develops one of the most complete narratives about cosmic intraspace and the importance of *interior* over *exterior* space—exterior space like the operatic visions of contemporaries such as Jack Kirby. (figure 4.2) Instead of taking up an interest in the origins of the universe through timeless Celestials, living planets, Source Walls, or even a clash between New Gods, Ditko examines what it is to face an obsession with perceivable anti-life, one that predates Kirby's—much later—use of the term. What's at stake for Ditko and, indeed, the mystic liberal more generally, is the establishment of an iconoclastic self that doesn't just refuse the collective but the collectivist and, therefore, evil impulses of the demiurgic force of the *world*. In the Ditkovian sense, to be an individual is not to be of the world but separate from it, and that separation is artistically established through Dr. Strange and his incursions into the interior spaces that would demand either his subservience or compliancy.

Dr. Strange faces not just challenges of supremacy by Baron Mordo or the dominance of multiple realms by Dormammu; he faces the challenge of his own inadequacies as a master of the mystic arts and his own internal struggles. But even so, when he is first introduced, he is not a man without substantial talents. He has the ability to explore both his own intraspace and examine the psychic struggles of others. In the very first Dr. Strange story, the fully-formed-but-still-examining Dr. Strange agrees to help a man haunted by a mysterious figure in his dreams. *Á la* Freud, Jung, or even Nathaniel Branden, Dr. Strange agrees to investigate this troublesome, mysterious figure in the man's dreams. Dr. Strange discovers that a villain named Nightmare, a Ditko creation, is the cause of the man's troubles. By facing Nightmare alone, Dr. Strange is, like the psychoanalyst or the all-seeing Mesmerist, able to see into the man's dreams and confront the evil within this unnamed supplicant.

Within the span of five short pages, Dr. Strange is able to expel Nightmare from the man's psyche in a way not dissimilar to the means by which a psychotherapist may be able to eliminate the ghosts of a patient's past by confronting and treating this specter as legitimate, then expelling it from the patient's subconscious. Aside from the ghost-busting elements of Ditko's narrative, what is also important is the embrace of these phantomistic elements of the human experience as real and in need of attention. In no way does Ditko deny that negative, or even immoral or amoral, experiences are a part of any given individual experience. Unlike Ayn Rand or a Christian fundamentalist, he does not treat such thoughts or experiences as failures; rather, he treats them as challenges that must be overcome in order for the individual to fully develop. Put differently, through a character like Dr. Strange, one learns that in order to become a heroic individual, to embrace oneself, to be comfortable with the heroic destiny embedded within each of us, one must first acknowledge and confront the weaknesses within and challenge the mindless hordes that threaten us all with their reasonless, unchecked emotion.

Dr. Strange's adventures to the cosmic intraspace—whether they be dreamscapes or dark dimensions—result in Strange confronting the demons that haunt the subconscious (Nightmare), the temptations of power and greed (Dormammu), or one's own evil opposite (Demon), and Strange's *modus operandi* is to explore these internal realms and expose these phantoms, both for himself and for those who seek his assistance. Dr. Strange is at once a psychonaut and a therapist. In order for him to fully realize his own potential as a student of The Ancient One and the mystic arts themselves, he must do more than expose and embrace the ghosts of the mind, *á la* Carl Jung. He must subdue and expel those ghosts, exerting the cleansing authority of his own mind and will. However, before he can make these strides towards greater consciousness and control over his own being, Dr. Strange often finds himself literally subdued and bound, typically manacled and gagged, so as to prevent him from casting any spells against his foes.[9]

In order for Strange to escape these situations, he cannot count on physical strength; rather, he relies on his ability to project himself in an astral form, leaving his physical body behind and allowing his consciousness to drift into myriad planes of existence, corporeal or otherwise. It is the power of Strange's mind that is paramount; his corporeal body is merely a fragile vessel for that greater entity. In large part, one of the major functions of the symbolism that appears throughout the early Dr. Strange adventures is the exploration of the relationship between mind and body. And, without fail, it is the mind that is paramount and must be perfected. This is a key component of the mystic liberal imaginary, as it emphasizes the importance of mental, intellectual labor over physical labor. In economic terms, it's the kind of thinking that helps justify the role of management over labor.

Neither Ditko's essays nor his comics spend much time considering economic liberalism, much less neoliberalism, as it appears alongside, and in conjunction with, the mystic variety (although Ditko certainly wrote about the virtues of capitalism with some aplomb). So, the connections among reaching greater consciousness, a labor of the self, and the achievement of greater wealth or corporate maneuvering are not actually at stake for Ditko as much as the production of whole individuals, principally of the philosophic and artistic variety. This is worth noting if for no other reason than it's a narrative motif that occurs throughout Ditko's long career, and while there are certainly instances, like that of Jabez Grimm in "Day of Reckoning," that concern themselves with pay commensurate with a day's labor, the emphasis is not on equitability between management and labor but on the importance of contracts and payment for services rendered. Rather, like the Lockean configuration of the creation of property, the creation of the individual—and the establishment of value for that person—treats productive, intellectual labor as an act of creation.

Through an excavation of one's own cosmic intraspace, and a willingness to expose and confront the ghosts, demons, and perils of the subconscious, an individual is formed and set on a path of dignified suffering towards, in Ditko's particular case, a heroic ideal. In the case of other mystic liberals, like H. P. Blavatsky, this kind of internal search may lead to an understanding of universal brotherhood and the connection of all races across time and space.[10] For mystic liberal practitioners of New Thought, it may actually mean upward mobility in a corporate neoliberal environment, as in the cases of Dale Carnegie or Norman Vincent Peale, or, as in the case of Neville Goddard, that the human imagination is God, the creator of all things. The confederate nature of mystic liberalism allows for a tremendous plurality of approaches that all focus on the importance of plumbing of the depths of one's own consciousness to render oneself whole and make sense of the external world and one's own connection to it.

Although Ditko's approach has much in common with Goddard's, his character's path of self-creation—perhaps unexpectedly—mirrors Max Stirner's advancement of the egoist. Stirner, as I pointed out in chapter one, was a critic of Enlightenment liberalism and the ghosts that haunt it—the state, the church, the family—but as should also be clear by this point, one of the primary functions of mystic liberalism is to harmonize otherwise oblique or even paradoxical relationships in service of the creation of individuals, capital wealth, power, and so on. And this is true of each of the major components of mystic components of mystic liberalism: Theosophy, New Thought, and Objectivism all draw on arcane, forgotten, or rejected ideas and beliefs, manipulate them in a way that services each movement's own ends and implement those revisions as truisms.

It's at least partially within that context that Ditko's heroic ideal operates in a manner similar to Stirner's egoist. For Stirner, the true egoist is a frightening threat to society, and society must either banish such a person to the outer recess of their perceived reality, or, if the egoist is treated as an existing person, then they must be denigrated as a sinner or labeled in some other excommunicative manner. To be sure, a major separation between Ditko and Stirner is that Stirner rejects the notion of moral, ethical goodness and evil, regarding them as shackles no more or less powerful than the trappings of any other societal institution. Where Ditko and Stirner converge is with the reception of the egoist, the ideal human. For such a person, society "exists only as a bogie or phantasm"[11] in the minds of the masses.

In rather obvious ways, the phantasmagorical nature of the heroic ideal Ditko portrays and that of Stirner's egoist is also present with pulp heroes like The Shadow, The Spider, or The Avenger, each of whom is temporally and theoretically in line with the development of mystic liberal ideology. On top of all this, Ditko, like other purveyors of mystic liberalism, draws on and repurposes the narratives of the past in the service of a particular ideology. In Dr. Strange the egoist is the phantasmagorical outsider who haunts those who behave irrationally or unjustly through his ability to access their literal, internal consciousness and expose them as the frauds they are, at which point those frauds are forced to confront the fact that whatever misfortune has befallen them is a result of the identity they generated for themselves with(in) their own mind.

A clear instance of this occurs in the same story from *Strange Tales* #110 discussed above. The story opens in typically Ditko noirish drama, where, on a stormy night in a city, in the liminal space "between darkness and dawn," a man fitfully writhes in bed. He awakens crying out after a nightmare, and he nervously resolves to find the mysterious Dr. Strange, whose name is only "spoken in whispers," to help free him from whatever it is that's tormenting his sleeping mind.[12] Dr. Strange is at once the mysterious apparitional figure whose existence can only be discovered by circuitous means or by travelling in the right esoteric circles, the same obscure means that one might associate with the occult practices prescribed by Madame Blavatsky, to find a hero who, also like Blavatsky, had ethereal, psychic access to a master of ancient wisdom in The Ancient One. It's in that muddled space between the darkness and the dawn where the proclaimed master of the black arts does his work, disentangling the darkness from the light, exposing the shadows cast by evil thoughts and deeds and exorcising them.

In the daylight hours, the unnamed client appears at the door of Dr. Strange's Greenwich Village manor. The client begs Strange for his help and the good doctor agrees to find the answers the client seeks by doing nothing less than entering his dreams that very night. The client returns home to prepare for Strange's visit, and in the interim, Dr. Strange enters a trance that allows his astral spirit to leave his body and travel to "a hidden temple somewhere in the remote vastness of Asia," where he consults with The Ancient One , "from whom all of his powers stem." The Ancient One doesn't provide Strange with any particular advice other than a warning that danger approaches. The Ancient One also offers Strange a grim reminder of his own mortality and that one day Strange will have to replace him.

That evening, Dr. Strange goes to the client's home and, by way of astral projection, leaves his physical body and enters the client's dream. Once inside the dream, Strange immediately encounters the figure haunting the client, a Marley-esque, cloaked apparition, bound by chains. When Strange interrogates him as to why he torments the client, the cloaked figure responds only that the client knows why and that he is a symbol of the evil that the client has done. The figure also tells Dr. Strange to ask the client about a Mr. Crang, whom the client later confesses to have ruined in business. During the encounter with the symbol for the client's torment, Dr. Strange also encounters Nightmare, a ghastly figure that commands much of the internal nightmare dimension Strange has trespassed into.

Nightmare, who Strange identifies as his "ancient foe," attacks the hero in order to exact the price for one such as Strange entering a hostile dimension—per "the rules of sorcery," Nightmare declares. At this same moment, the client awakens to the knowledge that Dr. Strange knows his terrible secret and decides to murder the doctor. Dr. Strange, now facing life-threatening danger in both the internal and external worlds that he simultaneously inhabits, calls upon The Ancient One to assist him. He is eventually able to escape the perils, forcing the client to confess his sins and set himself on a more honest, upright path that one day will allow him to sleep again.

Aside from the allusions to Blavatskian occult relationships between master and apprentice, the ability to astral project and explore the limitless planes of existence is also corollary to the abilities that other Theosophists, like Charles Webster Leadbeater, claimed for themselves.[13] But for positioning an artist and writer like Steve Ditko within the scope of mystic liberalism, the most significant moments in the story come with the explicitly symbolic appearance of the client's own lingering guilt, that one's dreams (and, in this case, nightmares) exist in an internal nightmare dimension, how one's own thoughts and deeds manifest both psychically and within the material world, and, finally, the therapeutic effects of confronting one's own failures. To this last point, the client says that he regrets coming to Dr. Strange for help because he's had to confront his own crimes, but it's precisely this recognition that Strange says is his path to salvation. It's not just what the client did that was wrong, it's that his conscious and subconscious thoughts were generative elements of his outward existence, and only by seeking the assistance of an adept—one who functions as a therapist in this case—can the client move forward and regain access to a saner existence.

The therapy angle to this story is significant if no other reason than it marks an additional, more secular link to mystic liberalism. Of course, it would be absurd to posit that psychology and the practice of psychotherapy are necessarily implicated in mystic liberalism; they are not. Rather, the link I am pointing to comes from a number of approaches to these practices by mystic liberals, and how these sources all indicate that—just as it occurs with Dr. Strange's client—it is the power of one's conscious and subconscious mind that creates one's reality, be it one of joy or misery. Such thinking is foundational to the work of Nathaniel Branden in his writing on the importance of self-esteem and his contributions to Objectivism.

During his time with Rand, Branden headed The Nathaniel Branden Institute (NBI), which was in operation from 1958-1968, the closure of which coincided with Branden's excommunication from the Objectivist movement by Ayn Rand. NBI was located in New York City, and it's been anecdotally reported that Ditko frequented NBI in its heyday, where he heard Rand lecture and allegedly met with her on several occasions.[14] Although I'm squeamish about unsubstantiated anecdotes regarding Ditko's whereabouts and interactions more than half a century ago, the clear influence of Rand and Branden's work on Ditko and the proximity of NBI to Ditko in New York certainly make this a reasonable possibility, and I'm tentatively willing to accept it.

That being said, Ditko's proximity (or not) to NBI, Rand, or Branden is ultimately secondary to what his comics reveal and how they reflect the mystic liberal ideology that was propagated at NBI and practiced by Branden as a therapist. Branden's therapeutic approach focused primarily on the role of self-esteem in the development of individuals, and his books demonstrate a conviction that self-esteem is at once a fundamental human need and is a greater force than self-worth. To Branden, "Self-esteem is the experience that we appropriate to life and the requirements of life." In this configuration, self-esteem is not an automatic disposition and cannot be delivered by an outside force; rather, individuals must labor over and earn self-esteem, and, thus, possess it.[15] It would not be too great of a stretch to link the laboring over, earning, and possession of self-esteem to the Lockean imagination of how property is produced and retained.

As discussed in chapter one, these ideas work as an obvious corollary to the mind-power of New Thought movements—in fact, they are practically indistinguishable. Being "appropriate to life" is within Branden's sense of what defines better living: rising to the occasion of life's challenges, rationality, and, most importantly, the attraction of good fortune. This latter benefit is straight out of the mind-power, New Thought playbook, and is probably most readily recognizable through its abuse in books and films like *The Secret*. In his 1994 book, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, Branden goes so far as to invoke The Law of Attraction, which is the notion that one's thoughts reflect their life's experiences. Pleasure or pain, wealth or poverty, sickness or health, all occur as a result of one's mental state. The mind is a generative force of one's own existence, and like-attracts-like. Positive thoughts bring good fortune, and negative thoughts or feelings create negative experiences.

The Law of Attraction has its roots in the mind-cure philosophy of Phineas Quimby, but the term was first coined by H. P. Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled*; it was then later adopted by New Thought, a movement influenced by Blavatsky, through the work of Prentice Mulford and Ralph Waldo Trine, and, by way of New Thought, it was then secularized and popularized in the service of self-help and neoliberal capitalism in the late 1930s by Napoleon Hill in *Think and Grow Rich*. Branden makes only a minor cosmetic change to this notion by substituting the term "self-esteem" for mind-power or the power of positive thinking. Branden writes, “The level of our self-esteem has profound consequences for every aspect of our existence.” Writing specifically about interpersonal relationships, he goes on: “The reason is that *like is drawn to like*, health is attracted to health.”[16] The opposite, of course, is also true.

For Objectivism, positive self-esteem is only earned by actualizing one’s abilities without apology. Indeed, this pairs nicely with the New Thought movement and its advocacy for reliance on oneself to “develop [one’s] inner powers, believe in [one’s] own experiences and intuitions.” Branden takes this several steps further by arguing that a lack of self-esteem is the root cause of nearly all societal and psychological ills, including drug addiction, domestic violence, alcoholism, and all varieties of crime. All of these extend from the absence of self-esteem, and the suspicious link between this and the specious reasoning of Horatio Dresser’s notion that “if we fail in life, our own attitude is at fault,” is nearly impossible to overlook.[17]

Perhaps tellingly, in *The Ayn Rand Cult*, Jeff Walker compares the relationship between Rand and Branden to Christian Science’s Mary Baker Eddy and her follower Ebenezer Foster,[18] Christian Science being a precursor to New Thought. Walker’s history provides further insight, linking Branden with New Age psychologist Roger Callahan, the developer of so-called Thought Field Therapy, along with Lee Shulman and his dubious book *Subliminal: The New Channel to Personal Power*.[19] Moreover, Brandon is an advocate for hypnotism,[20] a practice with deep roots in occultic and mystic thought going back to its origins with Mesmerism and Andrew Jackson Davis.[21]

The role of self-esteem and the Law of Attraction inform the stakes of Dr. Strange's encounter with his client in *Strange Tales* #110. It's the client's own chiseling thoughts that led to his corrupt actions and those actions, in just the way Branden insists, circle back on the client's subconscious state and his dreams, rendering him a tangled, emotional wreck. Moreover, not only did the client's inadequate self-esteem underwrite his crimes and psychological turmoil, this mixture of circumstances is also what drew to him both the Marley-esque apparition in his dreams and the evil Nightmare. For Branden, positive self-esteem is, "in effect, *the immune system of the consciousness*."[22] When that immune system is jeopardized, self-esteem and consciousness itself are endangered, attracting negative, destructive forces like those encountered by Dr. Strange's client. "I didn't suspect my dreams were caused by the many men I'd ruined in business," the client glumly confesses after the nature of his dreams was revealed to him.

The solution to this problem, where one cannot or will not identify the cause of their psychological turmoil, as Ditko's story instructs, is to enlist the help of a therapist—in this case, a "Master of Black Magic" who can access the cosmic intraspace of another by mystic means, and then expose and combat the evil forces within. To be sure, the client himself is not capable of doing battle with the ruler of the Nightmare dimension, thus requiring Dr. Strange's professional help. But what is of greater importance is that Dr. Strange forces the client to confront his own misdeeds, and by acknowledging and confessing, the client has an opportunity at rebuilding his life, cultivating a more positive, ethical sense of self. Failure to do so would only perpetuate his misery, and as Dr. Strange warns, acknowledging and cleansing his inner demons "will be the only way [he] can ever sleep again."[23]

A TEST OF WILL

But not everyone's conscience is as susceptible to change as Dr. Strange's first client. Many of the demonic figures that Dr. Strange encounters on his psychonautic adventures into the seemingly limitless realms of the interior have an insatiable lust for power, especially when it comes to power over others and the exterior, mundane world. One such being is Dormammu, ruler of the Dark Dimension. The character's name is first mentioned by Strange's archrival, Baron Mordo, in *Strange Tales* #111, but he first appears in a two-part story in *Strange Tales* #126 and #127 in 1964, after Ditko reassumed more control over Dr. Strange's stories. Unable to leave his post in the Dark Dimension, Dormammu still has designs on power and conquest over the exterior universe, specifically Earth, which is protected by The Ancient One and his protégé, Dr. Strange. Because he must remain within the confines of his own dimension, Dormammu sends a messenger in spirit form to the Ancient One in an attempt to lure him into the Dark Dimension so that Dormammu may dispatch with The Ancient One and begin his conquest. After receiving the messenger, The Ancient One summons Dr. Strange and informs him of the looming danger. Because the Ancient One is "too aged—too weary—to stop him," Dr. Strange volunteers to confront Dormammu in the Dark Dimension, a place "fraught with strange dangers," and defend the earth against a being whose "power is beyond description."[24]

Accepting his apprentice's decision to face Dormammu, The Ancient One sends Strange to the world of the dread one, and when the mists clear, Strange arrives in a surrealist landscape, typical to Ditko's work, where he immediately faces a colossal, "unspeakable menace" guarding the doorway into the Dark Dimension. The behemoth guarding the door immediately levels an attack against Dr. Strange, and, tellingly, the assault is not physical, but instead takes the form of a mystic ray that targets Strange's mind—"a test of *will*."[25] It comes as no surprise that Dr. Strange's will—the power of his mind—overcomes the behemoth's mystic ray. Symbolically, however, this test is a significant moment in delivering a mystic liberal message: before one can confront the dark, supposedly insurmountable forces within, one must demonstrate the psychic fortitude to take on such a challenge. Just before entering the Dark Dimension, Dr. Strange exclaims that he is "committed to the battle of [his] *life*!,"[26] but in the Ditkovian and mystic liberal senses, the battle is not just *of* his life but *for* it.

As will be discussed in chapter five, later Ditko characters like Mr. A argue that the battle for, ownership over, and creation of one's own life and personhood are determined by one's ability to overcome darker, irrational urges. Throughout Ditko's run on the character, Dr. Strange is on just such a journey, as he faces the demons and evils of these interior realms in his quest to become worthy of replacing the Ancient One as Sorcerer Supreme, thus fully actualizing himself and his heroic potential. So, it is what Dr. Strange encounters in the Dark Dimension that fully commits him to the battle *for* the realization of his life, as symbolized by the greatness of the charge that awaits him as the future Sorcerer Supreme.

After passing the initial test of will, Strange enters the Dark Dimension and is immediately observed and scoffed at by Dormammu. In Ditko's design, Dormammu has a cascade of flames and mist and only the vaguest indication of a head atop a fully formed body, and this design is revealing about the character's identity and nature. While his body is complete and menacing, that his head lacks a distinct shape is representative of his incompleteness as a rational being. Part of the lesson with this visual representation is that power—be it physical, imperial, or magical—is not the measure of one's value or even wholeness as a person. It's the mind and its form—and, therefore, its physical manifestation—that demonstrate value and worthiness. This lack of rationality, this weakness, is even more obvious to the reader when the dread one's servants proffer that the human Strange may be stronger than expected, not as a challenge to Dormammu's authority but as a matter of exercising caution. For this perceived insult, Dormammu attacks and imprisons his minions for their insolence in daring to question his judgment.

Meanwhile, Dr. Strange continues to demonstrate his rationalism as he runs a gauntlet of emblematized challenges on his path to face Dormammu, each one demonstrating both the dangers of diving deeper into one's cosmic interior and that the means of conquest in that space are wit and will. The first stage of Dormammu's gauntlet is a faceless, diminutive humanoid shape that emerges from a pocket of space within the Dark Dimension, and whenever Strange blasts him with mystic energy, the creature grows larger. In the second stage, Dr. Strange is "seized by the dwellers below"[27] after being sucked into a floating two-dimensional object to a world within the

Dark Dimension. The dwellers below that pulled Dr. Strange down are visualized as a mass of mechanized, humanoid shapes, perhaps automatons, who do not speak and attempt to tangle Strange up in some sort of webbing or mesh. Dr. Strange's actions and spells have no effect on these automata, and they are only warded off by a powerful blast from his enchanted amulet.[28]

Escaping the dimension of the dwellers below, Strange immediately encounters a handful of Dormammu's nameless lieutenants, one of whom traps Strange in a nearly impenetrable cloud of mystic energy. At first, Strange struggles against the constraining force of mystic energy and, like the previous attackers, his spells are useless against it—he must again rely on his enchanted amulet. He first cuts a small hole in the containing energy to blast his enemy, and then manages to burst the pocket around him, standing in a pose that implies the pocket is burst by energy emitted from Dr. Strange's body. (figure 4.3) The other attackers, realizing that Dr. Strange is their superior, escape through their own interdimensional portals.

Finally, as Strange moves forward for his showdown with Dormammu, he is accosted by a strange woman who has observed all of his trials against the dwellers of the Dark Dimension. In later appearances and stories, this woman would come to be known as Clea, but for now, she is a nameless inhabitant of the Dark Dimension, who offers Strange a dire warning before his encounter with Dormammu. Fraught with worry, Clea implores Strange to retreat before the dread one destroys him. Of course, Dr. Strange refuses and marches on towards the showdown.

This sequence of trials illustrates the stations of self-creation envisioned by Ditko's brand of mystic liberalism. My language here is deliberately evocative of The Stations of the Cross, the imagery of Jesus on the day of his crucifixion, a seminal event in establishing his godhood in Christian mythology. Each of Dr. Strange's battles with the inhabitants of the Dark Dimension is a symbolic test against which any prospective individual must pass by exploring their own cosmic interior. The first battle, where Strange faces the diminutive, faceless creature who grows with each successive attack, is an early indicator that brute force and physical action are not necessarily effective means of either overcoming or becoming. Rather, wit, cunning, and the creative and destructive powers of the mind should be put to their fullest use.

When faced with the challenge of the creature who grows when Strange applies the physical force of his spells, he faces the circumstances that Ella Wheeler Wilcox attempts to account for in her writing on obstacles in *The Heart of New Thought*: "do not stop to excuse any delinquency or half-heartedness or defeat by the plea of circumstance or environment. The great nature [of the mind] makes its own environment and dominates circumstance. It all depends upon the amount of force in your own soul."[29] I wouldn't argue that Ditko had this precise passage or thought in mind, but aside from being essential to New Thought, it's certainly in keeping with the imagery in his work and the resolution of Dr. Strange's encounter here. Strange relies on the force within his soul, and the knowledge he has gained to dominate his opponent, when less focused energy fails him.

This reliance on the force of the soul carries Dr. Strange through in his next two battles as well. When he is pulled down into his fight with "the dwellers below," his soul is again placed at hazard as he squares off against the mechanized mass, none bearing a distinct identity, their machine-like appearance embodying the conformity and programmability of those who have abdicated their sense of identity to an outside authority. In this specific case, that authority is Dormammu, but the implication is much broader. Dr. Strange proves his independence from such (un)thinking by escaping the dwellers below, whose very name carries the burden of a collectivized identity.

Similarly, as Dr. Strange has to escape the influence and control of conformity from the collective, he also has to rend himself free of containment and control by any one person, and this happens in the third phase of the gauntlet that Strange runs. When he is encapsulated in a pocket of energy by one of Dormammu's lieutenants, he is, on one level, challenging the authority that any one person may claim over another, revealing that such power dynamics must be resisted and defeated by wit and cunning. At another level, after Strange bursts the cloud of energy around him, he also demonstrates that he is equal, if not entirely superior, to these others, and he says as much.[30] By proving himself an equal, Dr. Strange closes out an important sequence in the labor of creating an individual self: at all three points, he demonstrates his ability to separate himself from others, proving that he is the master over his own identity, actions, fate. But for Dr. Strange, and mystic liberalism, there is one more test to pass before one is able to confront the darkness within and complete their ascendancy to complete individuation.

The fourth and final stage of the gauntlet Strange runs in his exploration of the Dark Dimension is the threat of self-doubt. In his efforts to challenge evil urges that threaten life and the external world, Dr. Strange's encounter with Clea is the last battle he must win before encountering Dormammu. Narratively, this brings Strange full circle from the initial test of will that he had to pass in order to gain access to the Dark Dimension; now he faces yet another test of will, but this time he's confronted with the futility of his actions against a more powerful being of negative energy. When Clea first appears, all the reader knows about her is that she has long inhabited the Dark Dimension and lived under Dormammu's iron rule. Understandably, she's skeptical of any challenges to his authority, and because she is so beleaguered by her existence, she has given up any hope that Dormammu's power can be limited, much less defeated. Clea's concern is earnest and forceful. "You cannot suspect how *powerful* he is! You throw away your life by facing him!" she warns.[31] Clea is experientially challenged when it comes to seeing the outcomes for those who dare defy Dormammu's authority.

To that end, Clea is not a physical threat to Dr. Strange or his mission, but her words, actions, and fretting symbolize a kind of reluctance and fear that must be overcome. Although Clea is in no way villainous, that she inhabits the Dark Dimension and tries to prevent Dr. Strange from moving on in his quest is telling, but her character is more complex than being an obstacle for Strange. Just as she represents the doubts and consternation that must be eliminated in taking the risk of formulating a self, she also represents the inherent good that resides within these darker places and how that goodness can be repressed and worn down until it no longer has the strength or will to fight. Eventually, Dr. Strange grants Clea protection after she helps him defeat Dormammu, but she elects to stay in the Dark Dimension after Strange offers her safe passage to Earth. This is again telling of the complexity of not just Clea's character but of the Dark Dimension itself, because even though she is outwardly plagued by doubt, she can't help but believe in the strength of Strange's inherent goodness. In the same way that her doubts were an obstacle for Dr. Strange to overcome, they are also one for Dormammu and the residents of the Dark Dimension to contend with as they try to exert their own evil will.

Steadfast in his resolve, Dr. Strange acknowledges Clea's kindness in her warnings then moves past her to face Dormammu, but just before the battle begins, Clea pleads with Strange once more, this time to renege his challenge to Dormammu not for his own sake but for the sake of both Earth and the Dark Dimension. To prove her point, Clea opens a portal to the outer reaches of the Dark Dimension, showing Dr. Strange a danger greater than the controlled evil of Dormammu: The Mindless Ones. These brutish inhabitants of the Dark Dimension are "primitive, savage, totally devoid of love or kindness, or any type of intelligence! They live only to *fight*…and to destroy!"[32] But as with any of the Ditko and Lee collaborations, it's the visual representation of these characters that is most informative. The Mindless Ones are a destructive horde that threaten to wreak havoc over Dormammu's dread domain. Individually, they are lumbering, craggy, slouching, gray creatures lacking any distinct shape, who indiscriminately attack anything they can, including each other, with their lumpy fists and beams that they blast from the cycloptic slats of their eyes.

The Mindless Ones are an important component of the cosmic intraspace of the Dark Dimension because, like the earlier tests of Dr. Strange's will and the power of his mind, these creatures, too, are a threat to rationality and the security of one's own moral, ethical identity. An evil, like Dormammu, might be reasoned with, but the Mindless Ones cannot. Although Dormammu lusts for power and control over others, the Mindless Ones only lust for the destruction of others. And, as the reader and Dr. Strange learn from Clea, it is Dormammu's power that keeps the Mindless Ones at bay by means of a mystic shield he has erected around the inner core of the Dark Dimension.

The symbolic stakes of this scenario are tremendous and are important for both Ditko's work and mystic liberalism more broadly. The incredible, evil power of Dormammu and the dastardly cunning of Baron Mordo are significant dangers to the world defended by Dr. Strange, but the Mindless Ones are perhaps the greatest threat in Ditko's Dr. Strange stories. The Mindless Ones represent the unmitigated drive of the mob, the collective that has abdicated any sense of reason or rationality, and, most importantly, self. They seek not to achieve but to destroy. It should come as no surprise that this theme runs throughout Ditko's work, and the visual motif of the mob is ever-present. In Ditko's Dr. Strange stories, in order to resist the mobs of the mundane, external world, one must first learn how to resist them in the cosmic intraspace of the mind.

CONFOUNDING THE NEGATIVE TEMPATIONS WITHIN

As should be clear by this point, the Dark Dimension is a representational space: it is the place in the mind that contains powerful temptations as they relate to ethics, morality, and the creation of an individual identity. Throughout this two-part story, we've seen Dr. Strange square off against conformity to and control by others. The Mindless Ones don't seek control—they have no values, no principles, and, to put it right on the nose, *no minds.* In the Ditkovian configuration of mystic liberalism, the Mindless One's attacks on the Dark Dimension operate in a manner similar to what Ayn Rand might consider "an attempt to *disintegrate* man's consciousness," and, for her, "disintegration is the preface to the death of the human mind" leading to the "retrogression of an adult mind to the state of a mewling infant."[33] Rand articulated her sense of "disintegration" almost a decade after the publication of the Dr. Strange stories in question, but the idea remains useful and prescient here because it helps to articulate precisely the threat Ditko's Mindless Ones present to the mind-space of the Dark Dimension.

What is also telling about the Mindless One's presence in Dormammu's domain is that, while these lumbering oafs threaten the external world, their point of origin is in the segment of the mind populated by the other perceived weaknesses and evils already discussed. By having already accepted and exploited the collectivized principles Dr. Strange had to ward off in defense and development of a reasoning individual identity, Dormammu has opened himself up to the perpetual attacks that take so much of his energy and focus. Conversely, Dr. Strange has no such lack of focus or diminished power because he overcame those earlier collectivized principles that Dormammu has embraced.

But just because Dr. Strange has overcome the principles that are the engine of Dormammu's Dark Dimension, that does not mean that the threat of the dread one also disappears. In fact, it complicates the relationship between Strange and Dormammu in interesting and profound ways. After Clea reveals the truth about Dormammu's role in keeping the Mindless Ones at bay, Dr. Strange faces something of a crisis: Dormammu must be kept in check and stopped, but, for now, he's a necessary barrier between humanity and the Mindless Ones. The stakes are at once psychological and political, for Ditko: how can the individual, rational mind come to terms with and defeat the evil of fascistic despotism without succumbing to the mob rule of collectivism?

For Dr. Strange, there is not a clean defeat of either, and the consequence is an ongoing battle against such thoughts and ideologies that must continually be both acknowledged and overcome. Resolving that he cannot abandon his oath to The Ancient One—and, indeed, his commitment to self-creation—Dr. Strange presses on toward his challenge to Dormammu. When he arrives in Dormammu's chamber, he sees that Clea has been captured, and Dormammu has linked her fate to Dr. Strange's. As the mystic battle between the two rages, Strange quickly learns that Dormammu's power is greater than his own, and he can see no clear path to victory. Upon this realization, he again struggles with doubt, and, all but explicitly acknowledging the Law of Attraction, Dr. Strange steels himself, thinking, "I must not allow my mind to dwell on thoughts of defeat!"[34]

As Dr. Strange fights on, what neither he nor Dormammu realizes is that because of the effort Dormammu is exerting, the mystic barrier holding back the Mindless Ones has begun to weaken. Perhaps it's the power of Dr. Strange's positive thinking or perhaps it's the inherent weakness in Dormammu's ability because of his own motivations or negative thoughts. If Dr. Strange fits into anything resembling the blended ideology of mystic liberalism, it's both. As the Mindless Ones begin to break through the barrier, Dormammu must turn his attention away from Dr. Strange, instead focusing on expelling the Mindless Ones and reforming the barrier. What happens next reinforces the relative power of thought and motivation in beating back the destructive horde. As Dormammu struggles to regain control and re-establish the barrier, Dr. Strange, recognizing the horrific threat the Mindless Ones pose to the inhabitants of the Dark Dimension and Earth, makes the decision to help Dormammu. The combined efforts of the two foes proves to be more than enough, but that Dr. Strange helped him enrages Dormammu because it places him in Strange's debt. And it's at this point that Dr. Strange has something of an epiphany.

After Dormammu swears his debt to Dr. Strange, Strange decides to "go easy" on him and makes only two demands: that Clea—in this story, an avatar of caution, worry, and doubt—have no harm done to her and, second, that Dormammu vows never to invade Earth. Dr. Strange is willing to make this deal because he recognizes that Dormammu follows some kind of personal code, even if it is an evil one by Strange's standards. Like the other obstacles Dr. Strange encountered in the Dark Dimension, Dormammu is only defeated by the power of Strange's mind and reason.

The physical battle between the two was, in the most generous terms, a stalemate. That Dr. Strange acknowledges Dormammu's code is less to demonstrate the villain's humanity than it is to show that, even if an evil cannot be eradicated, the dark urges that exist in the cosmic intraspace of the mind can be kept in check by means of reason and rationality.

This is the epiphany that Dr. Strange claims and offers readers: when exposing and confronting the darker elements of the mind, completely vanquishing those forces is not necessarily a feasibility. Rather, one must first acknowledge and negotiate with those darker elements, and only then can one establish their identity and control over it—an exertion of the power of the mind. The negotiation presented in this tale is similar to the resolution of the first Dr. Strange story: the client must learn to accept, confront, and overcome his own negative thoughts and their manifestations. The major difference between Dr. Strange and his client in that first story is that Strange is able to confound the negative temptations within, and he is able to do so by maintaining his resolve and positivity.

That Clea elects to remain in the Dark Dimension is an indication of the necessity of entertaining caution and doubt when facing the negative urges of the mind, but self-doubt is ultimately an obstacle to self-actualization in the mystic liberal sense. Clea's status as an inhabitant of the Dark Dimension, of course, does not mean she is an entirely negative figure. Throughout all of her appearances in Ditko's work on the series, she is portrayed as inherently good—a demonstration that the behaviors and thoughts that populate the Dark Dimension exist on a sliding scale. Dr. Strange also acknowledges this spectrum when he ponders the dimension's innocents. This complication is less a condemnation of Clea's timidity and self-doubt than it is a warning against how power-lusting forces, like Dormammu, can terrorize and traumatize good people into a state of subservience. In Clea's case, it cleaves her to a cruel and unrelenting dimension where she must struggle against her abuser and the internal conflict created by that abuse.

Upon Dr. Strange's return from the Dark Dimension, The Ancient One rewards him with a new, magical cloak and a more powerful amulet; indeed, these are the costume elements that would become some of the most readily identifiable visual elements of the character. Not without coincidence, the new amulet, The Eye of Agamotto, looks precisely like a real amulet: The Eye of the Buddha, which is a circular amulet with an eye in the center and surrounded by Snail Martyrs. The Eye of Agamotto is almost identical in its design, and lends additional evidence that Ditko had, at the barest minimum, invested time in researching mystic texts and likely spent some time in curio shops. (figure 4.4) After bestowing these items, The Ancient One also explicitly informs Dr. Strange that not only is Strange worthy of these sacred, occult tools, but that Strange will be the one who replaces him. As Strange walks away, The Ancient One considers "the awesome weight of the responsibility, and the unimaginable loneliness" that Dr. Strange will have to bear once he accepts the mantle.[35] The isolation and loneliness of enlightenment is a tragic theme that runs throughout Ditko's superhero work, but it is also the price that Ditko's heroes willingly pay for self-creation and continual betterment.

AN EMBODIMENT OF THE UNIVERSAL MIND

While Dr. Strange remains on a continual quest for self-discovery, creation, and perfection, he encounters greater and greater dangers with each dimension of cosmic intraspace he visits. At one point, he even confronts a demonic doppelgänger who attempts to assume Strange's identity before the doctor thwarts him.[36] It's in this latter stage of Dr. Strange's search that the Ancient One's weakened state is at its most dire, and he is only able to whisper one word: "Eternity." Strange takes this as a clue that only the secret of Eternity will be able to save the Ancient One. With nothing more than the Ancient One's fevered mutterings to go on, Dr. Strange begins to search for the meaning of "Eternity." Strange is unable to find any answers in the ancient, occult tomes or with any of the masters of ancient wisdom he entreats. The secrets he seeks, metaphorically, are the secrets of the ultimate self that he has sought all along, and the literal embodiment of that self, which brings with it cosmological truths and the ability to thwart any inward, nagging evils and doubts.

Meanwhile, Dormammu continues to lurk in the background, attempting to circumvent his agreement with Dr. Strange by tempting, employing, and controlling the power-hungry Baron Mordo. Because Mordo lacks the ethical and intellectual constitution to resist the temptation of the evils within, he makes for an excellent proxy for Dormammu to work against Dr. Strange. Mordo's excellence, however, is more to do with his role in Ditko's melodrama as an avatar for the incomplete self, or, what Ayn Rand might refer to as a "second-hander" insofar as "his ambitions are motivated by other men. He's not really struggling even for material wealth, but for the second-hander's delusion—prestige."[37] Unlike Dr. Strange, Mordo's sense of self is motivated by his second-hand nature: he seeks only the power and prestige in supplanting the Ancient One, and, when he turns his will over to Dormammu, his self-esteem is a product of that which Dormammu bestows upon him.

While Dormammu's continual failures *could* be excused as simplistic narrative moralizing, they also demonstrate the power of the Law of Attraction and its relationship to self-esteem. As Rand—and Branden with his more obvious mystic influence—would suggest, the second-hander creates their own failures and misery by attracting not just the similarly-minded but also those who seek power and influence over others. Says Rand, the second-hander admires dictators—in that way Mordo is drawn to and draws on the internal evil of Dormammu. As a result of Mordo's failing, he's "got to force their miserable little personalities on every single person [he] meet[s]," embracing and attempting to emulate the tyrants he so admires. Within characters like Mordo, there is no sense of self, no sense of independence because, as Rand argues, these characteristics "do not exist *within* [the second-hander]."[38] What Mordo wants is power without responsibility.[39]

For as willing as Dormammu is to lend that power to Baron Mordo in service of his own search for power, neither he nor Mordo is able to defeat Dr. Strange, and along the way, Dormammu learns that Strange is seeking the secrets of Eternity. Seeing Eternity as the greatest threat to his own existence, Dormammu determines to wrest those secrets from Dr. Strange by threatening the life of the incapacitated Ancient One. In Dormammu's tyrannical lust for power and control over others, he extols precisely the evils that Ditko would have learned from his encounters with Randian thinking: the greatest danger to Dormammu is a fully formed self, an independent mind.

In her essay, “The Soul of the Individualist,” Rand describes despotic second-handers as being “made to destroy the ego, themselves and others” with the aim of destroying creators or harnessing them, which she saw as synonymous.[40] The literal creative force of the mind that is central to New Thought, and Ditko’s philosophic interest in the role of creativity, in the artistic sense, become tangled here, demonstrating how New Thought mysticism and the alleged rationalism of Randian individualism merge in the service of mystic liberalism, and Dormammu represents a threat to those blended ideologies. Embodying just that self-destroying force that Rand describes, Dormammu simultaneously attempts to harness the knowledge that Dr. Strange gains in his search for Eternity, eliminate Dr. Strange by proxy, and then do the same to Eternity—all of which eventually leads to Dormammu’s defeat and the loss of his own power.

The knowledge that the dread one wants to extract from Dr. Strange was hard won by the sorcerer. Mitch Horowitz spends much of *Occult America* cataloging some of the most important occultists and mystics in American history, and in each of the cases he explores, one or both of the following occurs: the mystic embarks on a personal, internal, psychological search for revealed knowledge not commonly found in existing religious texts, or the mystic has secret knowledge bestowed upon them by a master of occult and ancient wisdom. In the latter case, for example, Blavatsky was both the pupil of her Masters of Ancient Wisdom and served as the master to her own inner circle. To that end, Horowitz spends a considerable amount of time in both *Occult America* and *One Simple Idea* examining how, throughout the history of the mind-power movement that generated New Thought, there is a consistent pattern of new, self-proclaimed masters emerging, either rebelling against their own masters or, like Blavatsky and Dr. Strange, sharing, promoting, and expanding the wisdom they earned and received from their own teachers. The earning of wisdom was active and experiential and not gained by relying on passive, rote memorization or the expediency of didactic lessons—not coincidentally, this process of earning wisdom runs opposite to Rand's second-handers.

With that history in mind, it's no surprise that Dr. Strange could not pull knowledge of Eternity by skimming ancient texts or by simply asking other learned mystics to tell him who or what Eternity was. Rather, although the Ancient One opens the gates for him, Strange must labor over the knowledge and experience Eternity in order to understand what it is. After gaining these experiences, he can then apply what he learns to cure the Ancient One's weakened state and stave off the onslaught of the second-handers Mordo and Dormammu. In order to access the Ancient One's wisdom, Dr. Strange calls upon the Eye of Agamotto to open a third-eye in his forehead, which allows him to attempt to penetrate the Ancient One's mind. But because, as is seen throughout his earlier search, he cannot simply extract and harness the Ancient One's wisdom, he encounters a series of traps deployed by the Ancient One's subconscious mind—barriers to protect his own labored-over knowledge. Proving his worthiness to his master, Dr. Strange gains access to the Ancient One's own internal cosmos by allowing himself to trust and be trusted by the Ancient One. The master assures Strange that his efforts to defeat Dormammu and Baron Mordo have "put [his] inner mind at rest," and then he grants Dr. Strange access to "the secret of how to contact Eternity."[41]

Armed with the secret knowledge earned from the Ancient One, Dr. Strange removes himself to a distant jut of craggy rock and repeats an elaborate incantation which causes the Eye of Agamotto to leave his chest, grow to an enormous size, and, where the eye had been, a portal opens into the world of Eternity. Once Strange has entered this new dimension, he drifts through a twisted, knotted cosmos full of layered and intersecting planes and long corridors, all visually revealing the elaborate networks of ideas and differences that make up any individual cosmic intraspace. Having mastered numerous other dimensions and internal realms, Dr. Strange is able to easily navigate the complexity of this space, moving towards the brightest star in the cosmos, which is actually another doorway that resembles the Eye of Agamotto. Once Strange crosses that threshold, he feels psychically drawn towards a bright light at the end of a long, darkened hall. Reaching the end of the hall, Strange discovers it was actually a tiny universe emitting the light, and, before his very eyes, the universe expands, growing into a humanoid form. This is Eternity. (figure 4.5)

A humanoid shape, filled with a visible universe, Eternity is a being of immeasurable power. Visually, Eternity represents the ultimate self and the creative force of the fully realized mind, literally creating himself using the power of his mind while simultaneously revealing that mind. Eternity is the living embodiment of cosmic intraspace, and Ditko unsurprisingly makes the visual choice to represent Eternity as a living cosmos, symbolizing both the mind's infinite power and capacity for creation.

After telepathically evaluating Dr. Strange and noting his worthiness, Eternity refuses to bestow any new powers upon Strange and reiterates the point made throughout Ditko's run on *Strange Tales*: physical "power is not the only answer"; wisdom is the key to defeating Dormammu and Mordo. Eternity then dismisses Dr. Strange, insisting he has more pressing, world-shaking matters to attend to.[42]

One might mistakenly dismiss Eternity's revealing that the power was within Strange all along as a bit *Wizard-of-Oz*-esque, but the mindpower message is unmistakable (and this is true of *The Wizard of Oz* as well), and Eternity, along with his message to Dr. Strange, is an embodiment of the New Thought concept of the "universal mind." For New Thought author Ernest Holmes, the universal mind "is the potential ultimate of all things,"[43] and for fellow New Thoughter Charles Haanel, it's

> infinite and omnipotent, has unlimited resources at its command, and when one remember[s] that it is also omnipresent, we cannot escape the conclusion that we must be an expression or manifestation of that Mind. A recognition and understanding of the resources of the subconscious mind will indicate that the only difference between the subconscious and the Universal is one of degree.[44]

If Dr. Strange went in search of Eternity to retrieve and earn the right to gain the being's power to save the Ancient One and battle Dormammu, then Eternity's message that Strange already has the power to defeat his enemies is precisely Haanel's definition of the universal mind: wisdom. The resources of the mind are all that Strange needs, and that he has reached and is worthy of the embodiment of the universal mind, Eternity, is all the power that he could ever hope to obtain. Dr. Strange, through the power of his own mind, has access to the infinite and may dispose of that power as his (sub)conscious allows—the source of all power is the cosmos within. And it is within the subconscious where Eternity remains, as Strange's precise memory of the being fades as he returns to the external, earthly realm.

Believing Eternity's message to be a kind of cypher, Dr. Strange returns to the earthly plane, only to find that the Ancient One has been kidnapped by Mordo and Dormammu, and at once he is hurled into combat with the two. The fight takes place over the next three issues of *Strange Tales*, where, just as before, Strange must rely on his cunning and wit to overcome the treachery of Dormammu and his earthly proxy. Dr. Strange outmaneuvers the dread one by playing to Dormammu's vanity, and upon Dormammu's defeat in combat, Dr. Strange banishes him back his own dimension, forbidding him to ever turn his power against Earth. Similar to his prior victory, Dr. Strange has won a symbolic battle against the darker elements of the mind, but he cannot eliminate those forces totally—they must always be contended with and pressed ever further backwards. And to make this point plain, Dormammu, in his defeat, still has a trick up his sleeve—claiming that he can never truly lose, he imprisons and threatens the life of the innocent Clea, who mustered the courage to help Dr. Strange in the fight. Before he can follow after her, Dr. Strange is warned against such an errand by the Ancient One, who reminds Strange that Clea—the avatar of doubt—is bait, a mental trap set for Dr. Strange. The Ancient One assures his apprentice that no harm will come to Clea so long as Dr. Strange remains free.

With Dormammu in retreat, Dr. Strange sets out on new challenges that continue to test his mental power, both in terms of his mystic acumen and his ability to be resolute in the face of solitude. But the nagging presence of Dormammu and his ethical commitment to rescue Clea carry with him, eventually leading to a cataclysmic showdown between the avatars of the second-hander and the self when Dormammu and Eternity clash in Ditko's last Dr. Strange story in *Strange Tales* #146.

Entitled "The End—At Last!," the chapter opens in the Dark Domain where Dormammu is raging and soliloquizing about his plans to destroy first Dr. Strange and then Eternity so that he may "reign over all that is."[45] Dormammu enacts his plans by first traversing the dimensions to that of Eternity and attempts to trap and contain the universal mind by catching him off guard. But Dormammu's spells are not enough to prevent Eternity from summoning Dr. Strange and warning him of Dormammu's pending attack. Strange re-enters the Dark Dimension through The Eye of Agamotto, where he immediately confronts Dormammu in order to free Eternity from Dormammu's spell. Once more, Strange is only able to succeed by relying on his wit, and he is able to release Eternity from Dormammu's trap, from which Eternity explodes into the fray.

By liberating Eternity, Dr. Strange, in an oblique way, has unlocked the power of his own subconscious mind against the aggressive forces of darkness represented by Dormammu's self-denying ethos. After Eternity is freed, the embodied cosmos first tries to reason with Dormammu, but these efforts are in vain. After all, Dormammu is living unreason, and the ruler of the Dark Dimension immediately moves to attack Eternity, even as the cosmic giant still attempts to warn him of this folly. Rather than choreographing an elaborate fisticuffs between the two, as he had done when Dr. Strange battled Dormammu and Mordo, Ditko presents the clash in just two splash pages. Over those two pages, Dormammu leaps towards and is absorbed by Eternity in the first page and a tremendous explosion from within Eternity's body occurs in the second. (figure 4.6) This artistic choice is significant for at least the reasons that it demonstrates the immense power of the two beings and that Eternity, particularly, is capable of both consuming and expelling the negative thoughts and principles Dormammu represents.

The explosion generated by the clash of these two diametrically opposed forces—and their existential incompatibility—is revealing of the kind of binary philosophic approach to human nature and action that would appear in Ditko's later comics with characters like The Question and Mr. A. And although the narration boxes leave ambiguous the fate of Eternity after the explosion, Ditko's visuals make the outcome more certain, as the universe inside of Eternity blasts outward, filling the timeless void where the battle is taking place. That void represents the blank slate of the mind—as each of the dimensions explored throughout Ditko's Dr. Strange represents individual minds or facets thereof. While Dormammu believes that Eternity has perished as a result of the blast, what he fails to recognize is that Eternity has consumed the empty space and all within it. As the elements of Eternity absorb the void, the reader is further alerted to the dangers of trying to exist in the space between the self and the anti-self, as Dormammu attempted by trying to dominate Eternity. This warning comes in a sequence of six panels on the page immediately following Eternity's explosion/consumption, and a large panel on the next page.

In that progression, Dormammu is hurled outward and finds himself between two meteors, one cold and black, the other a bright ball of fire—as opposite as Eternity and Dormammu, self and anti-self, mind and anti-mind, life and anti-life. For Ditko, there can be no middle ground between the two, not even for one as powerful as Dormammu. When the two meteors collide, there is a massive blast, and the darkened object crumbles and falls away as the bright, burning comet continues on. (figure 4.7) Similar clashes happen over the remaining panels, each time the colder object being destroyed as Dr. Strange is pulled into a separate plane by the restored Ancient One.

When Strange and the Ancient One reunite, the master informs the pupil that Dormammu's physical body had been destroyed, rendering him a *mindless* disembodied spirit, and although it's the Lee-edited dialogue that explicitly states Dormammu's mindless state, the careful reader of Ditko's visual narrative has known all along that Dormammu never had much of a mind in the first place. The same dialogue reveals that the fate of Eternity is uncertain, but, again, Ditko's visuals tell a different story, leaving just enough mystery to be provocative. After this bit of exposition, Dr. Strange then uses his power to liberate "those mortals whose psyches were *enslaved* by Dormammu,"[46] including Clea. This liberation points once more to Dormammu's position not as a literal being but as a state of mind that has the power to rule over and destroy, one that results from the annihilation of the self. Dr. Strange, through the resolve demonstrated in his trials—along with the assistance of the ultimate, total self in Eternity and the enlightened consciousness of the Ancient One—performs the labor of understanding the power of his own mind in shaping his existence.

As an artifact of mystic liberal ideology, Steve Ditko's Dr. Strange is a significant piece of popular culture that made such thinking available to a broad audience. Moreover, unlike other major texts, like those from Dale Carnegie or Norman Vincent Peale, the focus is less on the wealth-creating, capitalistic elements of such thinking and more on the self-creating, ethical components and power of the mind. The series also represents a significant moment in Ditko's career and, although he never stops producing supernatural horror or weird fiction, it is a point when the artist's interest in the philosophic exploration of ethics and self-esteem as they relate to individual existences become explicit, even didactic.

While many critics point to Ditko's post-Marvel period, after the final Dr. Strange and Spider-Man stories were turned in, as being the point when his work turned toward philosophic pedantry, what the Dr. Strange stories in *Strange Tales* and his work on *The Amazing Spider-Man* demonstrate is that Ditko was already interested in developing long, allegoric narratives that explored matters of the mind and the creation of the self. Both Dr. Strange and Peter Parker experience a tremendous amount of growth and change throughout the arcs that Ditko plotted out for them. Above all, it was the lived experiences of those characters that shaped them most profoundly, not osmotic events or accidents of nature. It is the lives they lived and their unique experiences of how each psychonautically traversed their own cosmic intraspaces.

Indubitably, this was more literally true for Dr. Strange than it was for Spider-Man, but even Spidey gets a taste of the mystic inner realms known to Dr. Strange in *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #2, when the two heroes meet for the first time. But even though Spider-Man gets a taste of the mystic realms, Ditko had other plans for the psychological development of the old webhead.

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[1] Religious Studies scholar Paul G. Hackett comments on the casting of Tilda Swinton in the Dr. Strange film and notes that the casting of Swinton is "*not* an instance of 'whitewashing' because it entails the specific erasure of Tibet and Tibetans as a distinct people and unique culture both by omission and by lumping them into the amorphous category of 'Asians' as if all members of that group were somehow interchangeable." Hackett also notes the complicated politics of the casting, citing screenwriters who "explicitly acknowledged that the erasure of Tibet was a political move premeditated and designed specifically to avoid the inevitable, theatrically hypersensitive response of the [People's Republic of China's] government concerning any and all things Tibetan" so as to avoid negatively impacting the box office success of the film. However, although Hackett is focusing specifically on the racial problematics of the 2016 film, he does take time to consider the earliest comics produced by Ditko, but either does not recognize or take into account the depicted racial identity of Dr. Strange and instead relies on the assumption of the character's Western identity. Paul Hackett, "From the Razor's Edge to the Scalpel's Blade: Larry Darrell, Doctor Strange, and the Trope of the Rehabilitated Western Man as Yogi," in *The Assimilation of Yogic Religions through Pop Culture*, ed. Paul G. Hackett (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 64-65. Emphasis original.

[2] For example, see: Frances K. Gateward and John Jennings, eds., *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson, eds., *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, repr. ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

[3] Although East Asian characters had long existed in other comics formats—like Alex Raymond's newspaper strip, *Flash Gordon*—Stuff, is one of the earliest East Asian heroes to appear in the comic book format. It is worth noting that Stuff first appeared in 1942 in *Action Comics* #45 in a story that was written by Mort Weisinger and drawn by Mort Meskin. The reader will observe that in note 2 of chapter 2, Meskin was linked to Ditko as being a source of inspiration for Ditko and his developing visual style, and the two worked together at Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's S&K Studio in Ditko's earliest years. Absent from Ditko's Doctor Strange are the overtly racist character renderings of the evil Chinese gangsters in Meskin's Vigilante story from 1945, and also absent are the racist dialogue affectations of Wesinger's script, but that Ditko was exposed early on to an artist—an artist whom Ditko greatly admired—whose collaborations produced one of the earliest superheroes or sidekicks of clear East Asian descent. Moreover, despite the troubling dialogue affectations and the visual depictions of Chinese gangsters, the way in which Meskin renders Stuff strikes me as unoffensive, particularly when compared to other East Asian sidekicks from the 1940s, like Chop-Chop. Chop-Chop, at best, was a horrifically racist cartoon caricature in a world populated by more photorealistic white characters. Although Ditko's admiration for Meskin is no secret, for further reading about Ditko's thoughts on Meskin's work, the reader is referred to Steven Brower, *From Shadow to Light: The Life and Art of Mort Meskin* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2010), 122-123.

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[4] Coincidentally, the Nick Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. series appeared in *Strange Tales* alongside Dr. Strange, but Woo did not appear alongside Fury until 1967, after Ditko left Dr. Strange.

[5] In a 1963 letter to Jerry Bails, Stan Lee infamously wrote, "Well, we have a new character in the works for *Strange Tales*, just a 5-page filler named Dr. Strange. Steve Ditko is gonna draw him. It has sort of a black magic theme. The first story is nothing great, but perhaps we can make something of him. '*Twas Steve's idea*. I figured we'd give it a chance, although again, we had to rush the first one too much" (emphasis added). The letter was later reproduced in the fanzine, *The Comic Reader*, which Bails also published. The clear indication of the letter is, first, that it supports Ditko's version of events, and, second, that Lee initially distanced himself from the character before he became a hit with readers.

[6] Ditko, Steve. "Toyland: Martin Goodman/Stan Lee." *The Avenging Mind* (April 2008), Robin Snyder and Steve Ditko.

[7] Mr. Crime first appeared in *Crime Does Not Pay* #24 in 1942, but even his introduction was not a wholly original innovation. Mr. Crime, as created by Charles Biro, is likely based on a cartoon mascot, Mr. Coffee Nerves. Mr. Coffee Nerves was designed by Milt Caniff and Noel Sickles and appeared in a series of advertisements for Postum, a caffeine-free coffee alternative developed by the Post Cereal Company. However, it's after the introduction of Mr. Crime and the success of *Crime Does Not Pay* that the horror host became a staple of the horror, crime, and suspense stories of the 1940s, 1950s, and beyond, perhaps the most well-known of which being the Crypt Keeper from EC Comics's *Tales from the Crypt.* The trope was so well known and popular that it was eventually adopted by local television stations as a part of their horror and monster movie programming beginning with Vampira in 1954, with the tradition continuing into the present day with hosts like Elvira and Svengoolie. Even the Crypt Keeper transitioned into television horror host for HBO's *Tales from the Crypt* anthology series.

[8] Interestingly, according to Robin Snyder, while Snyder was at Western Publishing in the early 1980s, it had been his intention to pair Ditko with Al McWilliams and writer Robert Kanigher on a Flash Gordon comic, as Western held the license at the time. The opening page of a Ditko Flash Gordon story, written by George Kashdan, appeared in the 2015 Snyder-Ditko publication *Out of this World* #17 as the story "Web of Treachery." See: Bob Heer and Robin Snyder, "Oh, boy. Web of Treachery brings up so, so many good memories of the way it was at Western. If only management had left us alone, it was our intention to give Flash to RK and Ditko and McWilliams.," Facebook, October 23, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/groups/robinsnyder/permalink/1105406142955049/.

[9] Jeffrey Kripal's *Mutants & Mystics* spends little time exploring Theosophy and Western Esotericism in Dr. Strange's stories. He does explicitly link Dr. Strange's journey into Tibet in search of ancient knowledge to Theosophy, but he then immediately moves on and does not explore the issue or Ditko's interest in occult knowledge at all. Instead he defers to other considerations of Dr. Strange that describe Ditko's work in comparison with Salvador Dalí and its supposed references to Beat culture. In so doing, Kripal, like Mike Benton and others, also accepts the mistaken notion that Stan Lee was responsible for Dr. Strange's links to the occult. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, paperback edition. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 133-134.

[10] *The Key to Theosophy* p. 41, 59

[11] *The Ego and His Own,* Second Part: The Owner: 3 – My Self Enjoyment

[12] *Strange Tales* #110, p. 1, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[13] Charles W. Leadbeater, *The Astral Plane: It's Scenery, Inhabitants and Phenomena* (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2016)

[14] This is according to ACE Comics publisher Ron Frantz. See *Ditkomania #90* (March 2013) and Rob Imes, "Ditko FAQ," *United Fanzine Organization: Ditkomania*, Accessed 14 June 2018, http://unitedfanzineorganization.weebly.com/ditkofaq.html

[15] Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self Esteem* (pp. 3-4: Bantam, 1994).

[16] Ibid. pp. 5-6. Emphasis added.

[17] This is also precisely the kind of reasoning that placed *The Secret* (another book deeply indebted to New Thought) under attack, and with good reason.

[18] *The Virtue of Selfishness.* pp. 153-154

[19] Ibid. pp. 160-164

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[20] Ibid. 164

[21] See Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America*

[22] *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, p. 18. Emphasis original.

[23] *Strange Tales* #110, p. 5, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[24] *Strange Tales* #126, pp. 2-3, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[25] *Strange Tales* #126, pp. 3-4, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*. Emphasis original.

[26] *Strange Tales* #126, p. 2, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*. Emphasis original.

[27] *Strange Tales* #126, p. 6, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[28] In the early Dr. Strange comics, editor and dialogue embellisher Stan Lee either didn't have a clear recollection or grasp of the centrality of the amulet Strange wore. As a result, Lee frequently inserted different language for the amulet, sometimes referring to it as only an "enchanted amulet" as he does in this particular story (*Strange Tales* #126). The object more commonly known as The Eye of Agamotto does not appear until the end of this two-part arc in *Strange Tales* #127, and even after that point, Lee has difficulty in keeping the name straight. Regardless of what language Lee inserts for either object, it is the visual and symbolic importance that is paramount.

[29] *The Heart of New Thought,* p. 17

[30] *Strange Tales* #126, p. 8, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[31] *Strange Tales* #126, p. 9, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[32] *Strange Tales* #127, p. 3, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*. Emphasis original.

[33] Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (p. 76, Signet, 1975). Emphasis original.

[34] *Strange Tales* #127, p. 7, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[35] *Strange Tales* #127, p. 10, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[36] See Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, "What Lurks Beneath the Mask," *Strange Tales* #136

[37] See "The Nature of the Second-Hander," *For the New Intellectual*, p. 70

[38] "The Nature of the Second-Hander," *For the New Intellectual*, p. 69. Emphasis added.

[39] Rand uses this precise terminology in her conception of the second-hander, but it's also significant when discussing the work of Steve Ditko because of the obvious connection this kind of phrasing and thinking relates to the character of Spider-Man and that series's most well-known theme: "with great power comes great responsibility."

[40] *For the New Intellectual*, p. 83

[41] *Strange Tales* #136, p. 8, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[42] *Strange Tales* #137, p. 7, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[43] *The Science of the Mind* (p. 44, Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1953)

[44] *The Master Key System* (p. 101, Murine Press, 1912)

[45] *Strange Tales* #146, p. 2, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

[46] *Strange Tales* #146, p. 9, *Dr. Strange Omnibus*

GROUNDED IN A CREDIBLE WORLD

SPIDER-MAN, BLUE BEETLE, THE QUESTION, AND A MORE PRACTICAL SELF-ACTUALIZATION

For the mystic liberal, cosmic intraspace doesn't always need to be imagined as a literal cosmos or series of pocket dimensions like those explored and conquered by Dr. Strange, and the power of individual thought need not be explicitly linked to the divine. One of the hallmarks of mystic liberalism is that it is so easily secularized and put into the service of neoliberal capitalism, self-esteem, or any number of self-help practices, and, as is often the case, some alchemical mixture of the above. In the social, philosophic, and spiritual production of mystic liberalism, there is consistently some embrace of not just the wisdom of the past, but also the value of experience: what is felt and observed but may defy quantifiable explanation.

In certain ways, such encounters with the unexplainable may be understood as the sublime. In the mystic liberal imagination, the individual experience of the sublime functions as a passageway to actualizing the power of thought, the power of oneself, and such a passageway can be revealed through art and literature. Introducing readers to mystic and mysterious dark karmic forces and cosmic intraspace throughout his earliest horror and weird fiction stories, Ditko presented his readers with a sense of sublime terror and awe. However, with the later influence of a particular—and peculiar—notion of Romanticism, Ditko provided readers a more grounded, secular version of cosmic intraspace and its potential through his 1960s superhero work on characters like Spider-Man, which he produced concurrently with Dr. Strange, as well as later creations like his updated version of the Blue Beetle and The Question.

In considering this more secular application of mystic liberalism, it's important not to misconstrue an effort for self-actualization with the improvement of one's character. "Character," while certainly important to many mystic liberals, is too slippery a notion and invites a variety of political and moralistic frameworks for defining the term. Indeed, this separation is also part of a move away from "character" in liberal thought that Helena Rosenblatt identifies in *The Lost History of Liberalism*. Further, as political progressivism waned in the New Thought movement through the latter part of twentieth century, Horowitz notes that New-Thoughters "disputed the old-fashioned ethic of self-sacrifice," and popularizers of New Thought, like Helen Wilmans, categorically denied that "the individual is to get rid of his individuality and lose himself in nothingness," believing instead that individuals should cultivate what Horowitz refers to as a "muscular self-directedness."[1] This more muscular, capitalistic, and individualist approach to New Thought mind-power layers in comfortably with the thinking presented by Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden as they conceptualized the need for and cultivation of self-esteem in the creation of fully formed individuals. Rand, in particular, applied this kind of thinking in her philosophy of art and her imagination of Romanticism.

The intellectual, cultural components of mystic liberalism are often looking backward in an effort to revise, recoup, or even reinvent the ideas of the past, and its approach to art was no exception. Traditionally, the Romantic period is understood to have run through the first half of the nineteenth century and operated as a response to Enlightenment rationalism. Tellingly, Romantic art and literature often championed the individual and was deeply invested in recovering and reinventing the past. In fiction of the Romantic era, the protagonist regularly either rejected or was rejected by society, placing the hero at odds not just with his or her peers but also with cultural norms and expectations: an outsider to society simultaneously rejected and needed for its salvation. In American popular culture, these notions were also applied to the mythologizing of historical figures like Daniel Boone and the romanticizing of the conquest of the American west. Individualist fantasies such as these have been further ingrained into the collective psyches of Westerners by countless films, novels, and comic books. In adapting such notions for the superhero comic, Steve Ditko presents a mystic liberal vision that aligns with the work of Ayn Rand and her vision of what constituted Romantic ideals.

Rand outlined her literary philosophy in *The Romantic Manifesto*, and although Ditko previously demonstrated his own well-defined set of ethical and individualistic ideals beginning with *The Amazing Spider-Man,* Rand's Objectivism becomes a more useful—but in no way the singular—guide to establishing a vocabulary distinct to Ditko and the intellectual framework for his comics. Ditko experimented with articulating his sense of justice and heroism in Objectivist-sounding language, and in defining that sense for Mr. A, Ditko cites Rand, saying, "For Ayn Rand, justice is objectively identifying a thing for what it is and treating it accordingly. […] The innocent is not penalized; the guilty is not rewarded."[2] It's worth noting Ditko's qualifying clause frames these as Rand's ideas, not his own. In applying Randian Romanticism to his superhero comics throughout the 1960s, Ditko created heroes who ranged from the affable, like Spider-Man and Blue Beetle, to the more aloof and bordering on Byronic, such as Dr. Strange, The Question, and Mr. A. Yet, *none* of Ditko's heroes would reasonably qualify for the self-destructive tendencies often identified by critics as corresponding to the Byronic hero. If such characteristics are identifiable in Ditko's heroes, it would be through no deliberate act on his behalf. Rather, Ditko's heroes are Byronic in a way more in line with Rand's definition from *The Romantic Manifesto*: the "'Byronic' view of existence […] is the belief that man must lead a heroic life and fight for his values even if he is doomed to defeat by a malevolent fate over which he has no control."[3]

In the application of his particular worldview to Spider-Man and Blue Beetle, Ditko created a character- and publisher-spanning Romantic epic, perhaps a first in superhero comics. Ditko's epic was an unconventional one; psychological in nature, it mapped the emotional and intellectual growth of Ditko's subject, who begins as a whey-faced pushover and becomes a confident individualist. Further complicating matters is that this psychological journey begins with Peter Parker (Spider-Man) and is then transferred to Ted Kord (Blue Beetle), thus extending the narrative over multiple characters and publishers from Marvel to Charlton after Ditko left the former and began work at the latter.

The path that Peter and Ted follow matches up with the kinds of narrative arcs that Rand developed for many of her characters, but also fits in neatly with the kind of work done with Dr. Strange as well as with the motifs found in Ditko's earlier comics. Peter Parker's "muscular self-directedness" occurs as he discovers his inner strength through introspection and eliminates the need to prove himself to others. As Peter develops his sense of self-esteem he, as Nathaniel Branden calls for, issues a "summons to the hero within."[4] As a part of that same mystic liberal framework, Ditko also provides the foundation for a radical shift in how extreme violence perpetrated by heroes would be perceived in the decades to come, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Constructing that framework for violent acts places Ditko within a unique historical context that separates him from his peers in a way that goes beyond aesthetics or questions of who created what. Ditko brought to the table both unique artistic sensibilities as well as a worldview that would inspire him to develop narrative structures and motifs that were all but untapped during the Silver Age of American superhero comics.[5]

Until *The Amazing Spider-Man* launched as a series in 1963, a large portion of Ditko's output at Marvel consisted of short, one-off suspense and monster stories that appeared in anthology series, like those he had produced at Charlton Comics earlier in his career. By taking on the Spider-Man job, Ditko embarked on his first long tenure on a character during his time at Marvel.[6] Given the common publishing practices for the comics industry in the early 1960s, where superhero adventures were a series of self-contained, individual units limited to a given issue, it is highly unlikely that Marvel intended for Spider-Man's tale to appear as something like the form of an epic.

Of course, pulp publications had experimented with continuity and shared universes in the past, Ditko's Spider-Man came about in an era where notions of continuity and a shared universe specific to superhero genre of comic books were in their fledgling stages, piloted by Marvel's publishing and editorial practices.[7] Although Lee shepherded a line-wide decision to have the various characters from the Marvel universe interact with one another, it's clear from Ditko's version of events that Lee was not thinking about the characters he edited and collaborated on as being in longform stories, and certainly not stories where the actions in one episode would have consequences for later installments. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of superheroes during this era were in fixed positions: they were adult millionaires, scientists, gods, or aliens, and they could not reasonably grow or change without disorienting the audience.[8] The perceived inability for a character to significantly, psychically change does not necessarily bar such characters from a Romantic classification, but it does exclude their tales from fitting into the mold of an "epic" because they cannot participate in any journey of substantial weight, be it physical or metaphysical. What's at stake is less the characters' elite status than their internal capacity for growth and development in those characters' behavior or sense of identity.

As Umberto Eco suggests, the plot of comic book superheroes, whether in a broad or narrow sense, "must be static and evade any development because [the hero] must make virtue consist of many little activities on a small scale, never achieving total awareness."[9] On a psychological level, the narrative structure developed by Ditko in *The Amazing Spider-Man* does not demonstrate an adherence to Eco's reasoning; instead, Peter Parker's journey is specifically one of awareness and self-discovery. By allowing Spider-Man and his alter ego, Peter Parker, a wide berth, Ditko is able to develop a character that fits into his thinking before and after his engagement with Randian notions of the hero and its Romantic antecedents. Parker has many adventures, but his epic is ultimately a metaphysical one, as each of his adventures is colored by Byronic secrets, a sense of awe, terror, and the increasing influence of Randian individualism on his mystic sensibilities. As Ditko uses each instance of these elements to impact the character of Peter Parker, Parker then grows and changes. He transitions from the shy bookworm who *desperately* wants to be a part of the collective (the in-crowd) to one who scoffs at and rejects the collective, thus recognizing the superiority of his own worth over those—like Flash Thompson or J. Jonah Jameson—who cruelly mock him.

PETER PARKER AND TED KORD AS HEROIC IDEALS

To illustrate how Peter Parker develops over time into a practicing mystic liberal, consider his behavior in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 as compared to his actions in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #31-33. In the former, Parker is a nebbish who is mocked, but still desperately reaches out to his assailants in hopes of friendship.[10] In the latter comics, the reader is presented with a Parker who is considered brash and arrogant by his classmates, despite not being so[11]; later, Parker wrenches fair pay for his photographs out of J. Jonah Jameson, who has to beg Parker for the product of his labor.[12] Perhaps without coincidence, the scene with Jameson plays like one between the power-hungry Gail Wynand and Howard Roark in Rand's *The Fountainhead*.[13] Furthermore, like Rand's heroes, Parker's awakening to a more confident, independent self does not render him immune to his peers' ire. As seen in issue #32, Peter is still bullied and referred to as "Puny Parker,"[14] but now the insults also label Peter as arrogant and a "swell-head who thinks he's better'n everyone else."[15] When compared to the Peter Parker of *Amazing*

Fantasy, what is important is that Parker's peers cease to influence his sense of self-worth. He no longer cares to be their friend; they have nothing to offer him emotionally or socially. But even at his most individualistic, Parker carries deep, Byronic secrets, such as his web-spinning alter-ego and the crushing guilt for his uncle's murder at the hands of a thief whom Parker let escape.

It may seem counterintuitive to link the tenets of Objectivism with Romanticism—a movement rooted in rejecting the seemingly rigid rationality of the Enlightenment—but the psychologically alienated and socially discontented heroes of Lord Byron are appealing for Ayn Rand and her particular notions of Romantic fiction as outlined in *The Romantic Manifesto.* Mystic liberal thought, as an individualistic and decentralized mode of political and social praxis, consistently blurs edges in its attempts to merge seemingly disparate ideas in the service of individual exigencies. Rand folding Romanticism into her own philosophy is reflective of those exigencies, effectively inviting the kind of open-system thinking that David Kelley called for in his break from more fundamentalist Objectivism in 1990. To that end, in *The Romantic Manifesto*, Rand views herself as "a bridge from the unidentified past to the future."[16] Perhaps this vision of an alleged "unidentified past" is what gave her license to provide a new and particular spin on how the ideals of Romanticism had been conceived historically.

Rand is careful to offer the caveat that she is referring not to concretes but to an experiential "sense of life" that she imagined existed in the West before World War I, and her intent is to act as a match to the candle of what she considered rational aesthetics. She goes on to say in her definition of Romanticism that there is "no generally accepted definition of [it] (nor of any key element of art, or art itself)."[17] Her specific definition of the term claims that, "Romanticism is a category of art based on the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition"[18] and that "Romanticism is a product of the nineteenth century—a (largely subconscious) result of Aristotelianism […] and capitalism."[19] Functionally, this is the same approach that occultists apply to their own brands of thinking, insisting that they are simultaneously new and rooted in more earlier modes of thought, be they the more ancient Hermetic ideas or the more recent Transcendentalist, capitalist, or leftist modes of thought. Rand, like many other mystic liberals, performs an alchemy of convenience—and does so effectively.

Rand also identifies a split in Romantic fiction that separated volition into two categories: existence and consciousness. Volitional existence, she explains, occurs in plot-driven works, and volitional consciousness appears in character- and psychologically-driven works. Both have merit, but Rand argues that in order for a Romantic work to be complete and of the highest standard, it *must* incorporate both elements competently. For Rand, literature that features only the Byronic hero but is not plot-driven has value but is incomplete because it is representative *only* of volitional consciousness.[20]

Rand's contentious interpretation of the Romantic movement aside, that man is a volitional being overlaps with much of the work of Steve Ditko as it applies to the psychological development of his characters, if in no other way than to demonstrate that anyone can and must motivate oneself,[21] supplementing those motivated thoughts with what Wilmans called "courageous action."[22] In the case of the more metaphysically grounded framework Ditko establishes for Spider-Man, there is plenty of room for a more traditional approach to Romanticism as well. Fear and mystery were key elements Ditko brought to the character, and Romanticism's historical celebration of terror, the sublime, and awe along with an embrace of exotic worlds and landscapes makes it an ideal candidate for the medium of comic books, and Ditko exploited that potential in the terror he created through characters' visual expressions in his suspense and horror comics, the tangled and disorienting sublimity of the landscapes traversed by Dr. Strange, and the awe-inspiring heroic action of his late Spider-Man stories. If we accept, at least tentatively, the Randian approach as a brand of Romanticism and blend it with those more traditional aesthetic elements, it's easy to see how Steve Ditko was able to adapt this into a psychological journey for his characters, creating a form of a "Romantic epic" that had yet to exist in American superhero comics.

The superhero genre was not Ditko's first foray into Romantic fiction in the service of mystic liberalism. He frequently applied a Romantic approach to the horror and weird suspense tales that make up the largest portion of his non-superhero work. In those stories, he masterfully creates a sense of terror, apprehension, and awe—a hallmark of his career. Ditko's mastery of these themes plays a critical role in his superhero work, allowing characters like Peter Parker to relate their deep internal struggles and existential despair to the reader on almost purely visual terms. In the case of Peter Parker, each crisis of conscience he faces leads to a major change in his development. This happens most famously when Peter holds himself responsible for failing to stop Uncle Ben's eventual murderer when he had the chance in *Amazing*

Fantasy #15, and again during the events of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #32 and #33. These latter issues, particularly the opening five pages of issue #33, have become iconic moments in the history of contemporary superhero comics.

Recognizing the effective use of despair in Ditko's superhero work is not meant to imply that Ditko would have aligned himself with anything approaching a nihilistic worldview—quite the opposite. In fact, in *Blue Beetle* #5, Ditko has one of his more philosophically contemptuous villains utter, "Man […] is a helpless, meaningless speck in a never-ending universe."[23] Instead of wallowing in existential despair, Ditko uses moments of turmoil as a literary device through which the Romantic hero proves his or her superiority by using reason and a heroic spirit to triumph. Ditko's heroes do not succumb to what Rand calls "the unhampered sway of […] unleashed emotions," but instead become masters of their own minds and emotions.[24]

It is in the face of a world gone mad or at the hands of external torment that heroes must be willing to overcome the crushing weight of their emotions and defend their values, even if it means certain death. To Ditko, this is when the hero must employ the volitional ability that Rand links to Romanticism, as he says, "Emotions are not tools of cognition. […] Only reason can determine what is right and what man should do."[25] In Randian terms, Ditko gives his characters volition in regard to both consciousness and existence. This allows each character to work within a highly imaginative narrative framework in which their psychological state is grounded in what Wilmans might refer to as a "realistic idealism."[26] For Rand, this approach is an element of "top rank" Romantic literature that has a "full commitment to the premise of volition."[27] Ditko's

Peter Parker seems to offer the clearest example of this "top rank" approach to the Romantic hero. A ringing example of this approach appears in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #32-33 in a scene where Parker faces overwhelming odds while trying to manage his personal life, save Aunt May, and defeat Doctor Octopus. Parker's frustration and the channeling of that frustration into heroic action is observable in different stages of this story arc. In each stage, it is Parker's ability to reason that allows him to triumph.

Although the "Master Planner" story that spans issues 31-33 is an exclamation point on the kind of long-term character development that Ditko is most interested in, because it is a pinnacle for both mystic liberalism and a transitional moment American comics, I am tabling a close reading of that story until the conclusion of this book. Nonetheless, it's still important to demonstrate just how Peter Parker came to that transformative moment. There are numerous examples of how Ditko planted, sometimes very subtle clues, about major plot and character developments (e.g. the identity of the Green Goblin discussed in the introduction), one of the most significant shifts in Peter Parker's character occurs in *Amazing Spider-Man* #18. The events of this issue set into motion a number of plot threads that eventually resolve in the "Master Planner" sequence of issues, including problems with Aunt May's health and Peter's love-trouble with Betty Brant, but it's an issue where Peter has an epiphany about himself makes that leads to the payoff in issue 33.

At the close of *Amazing Spider-Man* #17, Peter runs away from a fight with the Green Goblin because, in the midst of the action, he learns that Aunt May has suffered another heart attack and has been hospitalized. Of course, no one knows *why* Spider-

Man is running away from the fight, and J. Jonah Jameson has a field day with it, taking it as an opportunity to drag Spider-Man's name through the mud once more. Jameson, for what it's worth, is successful in turning the public against Spider-Man, branding him a coward. On top that, Peter's relationship with Betty is on the rocks because he's failed to communicate with her, which only compounds the shame he's experiencing at the hands of Jameson and guilt Peter feels for not being able to do more for May. It's all too much for him, and as he wads up his Spider-Man costume and broods about why things never seem to go right for him. He is plagued by self-doubt, blaming himself—and his secret life as Spider-Man—for the hurt experienced by any person who's come into contact with him and every failure he's had to shoulder.

Throughout most of *Amazing Spider-Man* #18, Peter frets about how he and Aunt May will be able to pay her medical bills, and tries to implement a handful of get-rich-quick plans by selling his image to a trading card company and the secret-formula for his webbing to an adhesive manufacturer—neither of which work out. In between, he avoids a fight with Sandman, running away again, and anxiously remembers each of the times he nearly lost his life fighting supervillains. When he gets back home after a day of psychological defeat, he finds Aunt May home alone, and racked with guilt and fear about her frail condition, he decides he can no longer be Spider-Man and must devote himself to Aunt May's wellbeing. May doesn't want to hear any of it, and more-or-less ignores Peter's outward self-pity.

May repeatedly tells Peter not to worry about her or to get out of the house, Peter ignores her slinks back into the passive version of himself that first appeared in *Amazing*

Fantasy #15. One of the ways this reversion is evident is seen when Peter seemingly seeks approval from the likes of his bully, Flash Thompson and even brags about not confronting Flash[28] when in just the prior issue he was needling the bully.[29] Peter believes that the best thing for him to do is give up his own life and "be the kind of guy [Aunt May] wants [him] to be,"[30] leaving his life as Spider-Man behind. Peter thinks that "if he were just an ordinary Joe…all the other worries [he's] got would just melt away."[31] But Peter hasn't understood what kind of guy May wants him to be, but instead of lecturing Peter about what *he should do*, she lectures him about what *she will do*: and what she claims for herself—as though it were out of the mindpower playbook—is "gumption" along with "the will to live" and "to fight."[32] This is an important thematic element as these traits that May identifies for herself are part-and-parcel of mystic liberal notions of reason and what Ditko would also call "proper principles."[33] It's only by adopting this mode of thought that Peter is able to dig himself out of the well he's fallen into.

Upon hearing this from Aunt May and seeing that she is on the mend, Peter finally sees the light and recognizes that he's wasted "too much time in self-pity."[34] With that, he makes the determination that "there's nothing to *stop* [him] from being *Spider-Man* again," and puts on his costume again, and declares himself to be a new man who will no longer be shackled by self-doubt and will fight as he's never fought before.[35] This rebirth, of course, comes with growing pains, but Peter manages to repair some of his friendships (*Amazing Spider-Man* #19), get his job at The Daily Bugle back while simultaneously sticking it to Jameson (*Amazing Spider-Man* #19), stand-up to

Flash Thompson (*Amazing Spider-Man* #20), draw attention from girls for his personal accomplishments (*Amazing Spider-Man* #21), earn more respect from his peers by standing up for himself (*Amazing Spider-Man* #21). Later, he later nearly succumbs to psychological tricks that cause him to question his sanity. In issue #24, Mysterio poses as a psychiatrist, believing the way to defeat Spider-Man is to destroy his confidence, and for a moment, it nearly works. But in spite of all the ways Peter grows and is able to put his old anxieties and fears behind him, he still struggles with the solitude brought on by being Spider-Man. While Peter seems at peace with the limitations that his dual life as Spider-Man imposes on him, the toll it takes on his relationship with Betty is difficult for him to bear, he eventually comes to terms with it—even though it's not the outcome he wanted.

The unprecedented psychological growth and approach to character Ditko applied to mainstream superhero comics of the Silver Age set a new standard for storytelling in American comic books. Concurrent with the dramatic changes taking place with Peter Parker as a character, Ditko also included a series of subplots and seeming background characters that eventually pay off later in the series—the most significant of which was the revealing of Norman Osborn as the secret identity of the Green Goblin, which Ditko did not even have the opportunity to draw as he left the company one issue before the reveal in *Amazing Spider-Man* #39. Ditko's Spider-Man stories offered a radical tonal shift in comparison to comics produced by Ditko's contemporaries and colleagues at Marvel. While other revolutionary comics were being created at Marvel by the likes of Jack Kirby, Ditko's Spider-Man work set itself apart by focusing on more than wildly imaginative plots that featured intergalactic threats, magic, or some combination of the two. But similar to the mystical world of Dr. Strange, Ditko's Spider-Man focuses on placing characters' internal struggles at the forefront and allowing those struggles and triumphs to drive the plot.

One way this is exemplified is in the complicated history surrounding Spider-Man's creation and Jack Kirby's involvement with the character. Briefly, Kirby had initially designed the character, and it bore striking—likely not coincidental—similarity to another character Kirby had worked on for Archie Comics called The Fly. Additionally, the alter-ego for Kirby's Spider-Man was not merely a teenager, but a kid who put on a magic ring that turned him into the adult hero, akin to the magic that turned Billy Batson into Captain Marvel. While not limited to these examples, they assist in demonstrating that prior to Ditko's involvement, the character was set to fit within the mold that Kirby had employed for several years, both on his own and with his long-time creative partner Joe Simon. Ditko's approach not only abandoned Kirby's original concepts but, as Sean Howe points out, *The Amazing Spider-Man*'s "moody, almost foreboding style hardly seemed to cry out for teenage superheroics."[36] Ditko's approach to the superhero was a far cry from the bombast of Kirby-drawn works like *Fantastic Four*. The Fantastic Four's Johnny Storm—the Human Torch—had a brash, whimsical energy that matched his superpowers and made him popular with his peers, whereas Ditko's Peter Parker was introspective and unpopular in a way reflective of his fear-inducing costume that hid him away from the world. If Johnny Storm was Elvis Presley, Peter Parker was James Dean.

Especially within the pages of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Ditko's focus on Peter Parker's internal and interpersonal struggles grounds the series in a way seldom seen in Silver Age superhero comics. It's true that nearly all of the Marvel superheroes of the 1960s had some sense of verisimilitude because they were based in New York City as opposed to fictional stand-ins like Gotham or Metropolis, but this was hardly a new innovation, and New York City had been continually populated by superheroes since the genre's earliest days. The setting may assist in establishing a certain amount of realness, but *The Amazing Spider-Man* is set apart because its "realness" is a byproduct of the characterization and the message it delivers to its readers.

Even if the reader's politics are distant from Ditko's own, by this point in his career, Ditko's intent for his heroes was that they should be "admired for [their] achievements and regarded as an ideal or model."[37] Peter Parker is an example of one of those very models, and just as Peter Parker is able to eliminate his co-dependence on the collective that mocks him, so too can the reader. In the same way Ditko's choice to completely cover Peter Parker's face with the Spider-Man mask was, in part, designed to allow readers from any background to identify with the character, Peter's internal quest for personal control and integrity could be mapped onto the reader as well. That superheroes represented a moral ideal to one degree or another was anything but a new notion for comic books of the mid-1960s. Instead of Superman selling war bonds or Batman offering ham-fisted life lessons to Robin, what's different in Ditko's configuration is that the hero operated not as a literal but as a philosophic model for how to deal with the very real and complex social and psychological struggles the reader may have faced was new.

SUPERHEROES SIGNIFYING SOMETHING DEEPER

Separating himself from Marvel, Steve Ditko left Marvel and *The Amazing Spider-Man* in 1966 and began producing more superhero work for Charlton Comics. As discussed in chapter two, after studying under Jerry Robinson, Ditko had cut his teeth on horror comics published by Charlton in 1950s and never really stopped selling work to the company. Free of Lee's editorial oversight and the impact of those "others" and "outsiders" he believed obfuscated his intent, Ditko took full advantage of the creative freedom afforded by Charlton. Continuing to experiment with more explicitly philosophic explorations, Ditko returned to Captain Atom, with writer Joe Gill, and independently created a new version of the Blue Beetle, and that version's alter-ego, Ted Kord.

The temporal proximity and the similarity between the Spider-Man and Blue Beetle lends additional weight to the reading that Ted Kord's story served as the logical extension of Peter Parker's life into the adult world and that Ditko picked up right where he left off with *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Kord is affable, brilliant, and at ease taunting supervillains when in combat—just like Peter Parker. These traits, as they apply to Kord, are also worth noting when questions arise about the portrayal of Spider-Man and who was responsible for the playful banter as it informed the character's identity. By eschewing the mystical elements associated with the Dan Garrett version of Blue Beetle, Ditko also grounds Ted Kord's adventures in a more metaphysically realistic setting just as he had intended for Peter Parker. Kord even looks stunningly similar to Parker.

Not only does Parker look like Kord, but his life seems to be Ditko's vision for Parker's future: from brilliant science student to brilliant inventor and industrialist. The two are all but exactly the same character. As I said, Ditko scoffed at me when I asked him about this remarkable coincidence, but the choice to illustrate the characters virtually identically, right down to the facial expressions and hair color, seems to be anything but an accident—Ditko is more than capable of drawing unique characters with distinct physical and facial features.[38] With even a cursory glance at the characters, it is clear that Ditko makes no clear visual distinction between Kord and the Peter Parker who appears in his later issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. (figures 5.1 and 5.2)

Where this reading runs into trouble, unfortunately, that Blue Beetle initially appeared as a back-up feature in *Captain Atom*, and when the character received his own series, it only ran for five issues. As a result, the number of available stories for comparison are limited. Further, because the early stories are trying to establish Blue Beetle as a character they are more heavily focused on action. Along with that foregrounding, Ditko deals with the continuity issue of presenting readers with a *new* version of the Blue Beetle by inventing a mystery to explain what happened to the previous Blue Beetle, Dan Garrett. In a manner similar to how Ditko structured his Spider-Man stories, this Dan Garrett subplot runs in the background while keeping an invigorating pace, presumably to maintain reader interest. Although the back-up features and the first four issues of *Blue Beetle* deal less with the personal struggles and psychic overcoming that Peter Parker faced, there are other similarities between the life of Peter Parker and the life of Ted Kord, some of which never saw print until nearly forty years after Charlton cancelled their superhero line in 1968. In 2007, DC Comics printed the previously unreleased *Blue Beetle* #6.

The story features a few key moments as they relate to the overlaps between Ted Kord and Peter Parker. The first of which is the way Ted Kord is treated by others because of his status as a "brainy type."[39] The rejection by the in-crowd here is picks up right where the jeers and bullying that Peter Parker constantly faced, most recently in *Amazing Spider-Man* #34 where Harry Osborn ridicules Peter for being an "egg-head" and tries to edge Peter out of his social scene.[40] Similarly—though this is true of most of Ditko's heroes—just as Peter Parker consistently found himself smeared in *The Daily Bugle*, Ted Kord finds himself under fire from the media, which has already tried and convicted him for being involved with a murder he did not commit. Another intriguing commonality occurs with the relationship that is struck-up between Ted Kord and Professor Aristotle Rodor to solve the murder for which Blue Beetle has been unjustly accused. Professor Rodor is an associate of The Question, but first appeared in the Question back-up feature *Blue Beetle* #1 and is a scientist and inventor who created the special features of The Question's costume. Unlike the relationship between Professor Rodor and The Question, the one between Ted Kord and Rodor has a dynamic similar to the one Ditko established for Peter Parker and Curt Connors in *Amazing Spider-Man* #32. (figure 5.3 and figure 5.4)

Along with these strikingly familiar circumstances for both characters, one of the most interesting is the crisis of conscience Ted Kord has that, just like Peter Parker's moments of doubt, lead to question whether or not he should continue on as the Blue Beetle. Unsure of whether he is responsible for a man's death, Tracey—Kord's girlfriend and lab assistant—asks, "Now what happens to you and the Beetle?" To which Kord replies, "It's too early to say! Even though Fend was a killer, my aim was to catch him, not to be his executioner! Maybe I don't have the legal right to fight crime and no one could legally make me catch a murderer."[41] (figure 5.5) The key difference between this moment and one of Peter Parker's episodes where he considers his future as a costumed hero is that Kord is much more measured in his response. Whereas Parker is more overcome by the moment, Kord is more contemplative and unwilling to make an immediate decision. To my reading this is an outcropping of the kind of psychological growth experienced by Peter Parker as he moved from adolescence into adulthood and is evidenced by the changes discussed earlier. Even when Parker considers quitting, after the events of *Amazing Spider-Man* #18, his struggles with doubt are never about whether he will actually quit being Spider-Man but how he will cope with the complications such a dual existence begets. Kord deals with those same complications, and, just as Peter Parker pledged to face those consequences at the end of *Amazing Spider-Man* #18, Kord is also prepared to accept responsibility for his actions—even if accidental.

As Ditko continues the development of the hero from the pages of *The Amazing Spider-Man* into *Blue Beetle*, he still leaves room for psychological development in terms of understanding what it meant and means to be this mystic liberal heroic ideal. Unlike a traditional quest, there is no clear psychological peak or ending that his Romantic hero reaches. This is not to say that Ted Kord/Peter Parker could not reach that level. Instead, Ditko takes a cue from Ayn Rand's narrative choices and places Ted Kord/Peter Parker in a role similar to *Atlas Shrugged*'s Hank Rearden, and it's a dynamic common in mystic liberal circles: the master and the apprentice. In Rand's novel, Rearden needs John Galt to serve as the ideal type that represents the kind of man Rearden can be, and in keeping with the Randian model, Ted Kord/Peter Parker requires a similar figure. Both Rand and Ditko's narratives demand a figure who would validate the psychological trajectory of an emerging hero: a presumed philosophic and moral pinnacle. Of course, neither Ditko nor Rand write as though their philosophy needs outside validation to determine its truth, but their narratives require a heroic ideal to demonstrate that such a person could exist in the realistic worlds that both authors are attempting to create. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Hank Rearden looks towards John Galt as an intellectual and human ideal, and the two become fast friends, building a relationship based on mutual respect. In the pages of *Blue Beetle*, Vic Sage, alias The Question, would serve as Kord's John Galt.

WHAT MAKES A HERO?

Before Ted Kord and Vic Sage met, Ditko offered readers an in-depth look at Vic Sage in what ending up being the only issue of *Mysterious Suspense* in October 1968. The issue featured an issue-long story broken up into two distinct episodes, written and drawn by Ditko. What this issue accomplishes is the unambiguous establishment of The

Question as an emblem for the kind of heroism that Peter Parker and Ted Kord are struggling toward. Each of the chapters in *Mysterious Suspense* are bookended by narration boxes that offer philosophic questions and precepts for which the story provides a kind of praxis. Whereas Parker and Kord must cope with and overcome their internal conflicts, The Question has already determined that, regardless of the consequences, he will conquer any obstacle by way of his integrity and unwavering sense of what is right—his will, and thus, his mind are his greatest assets. Norman Vincent Peale might add that failure to achieve such ends results from a lack of wholeheartedness. Says Peale, "People are defeated in life not because of lack of ability but for lack of wholeheartedness. … Results do not yield themselves to the person who refuses to give himself the desired results."[42] In the opening and closing narration boxes from part one of the issue, Ditko echoes Peale's assignment of responsibility, addressing his readers:

> What is the greatest battle an individual must fight? Is it against the mystic terrors of unknown dimensions? Is it against the hordes of alien beings from outer space, or against foreign armies or criminal conspiracies? No! The great battle you or any person must *constantly* fight is not any of those! …
>
> The greatest battle a person must *constantly* fight is to uphold proper principles, known truths, against everyone he deals with! A truth cannot be defeated! But when a man refuses to know what is right or

> deliberately accepts, or does, what he knows is wrong…he defeats himself! The truth remains unbeaten![43]

In the opening passage, Ditko is neither dismissing nor distancing himself from the battles and action of other superhero comics. Grounding characters—like The Question, Blue Beetle, and Spider-Man—in a credible world in no way implies that other modes of fantasy are necessarily inferior. Instead, Ditko is drawing his readers' immediate attention what is most at hazard are those things that cohabitate in the mind: principles and truth. Unlike Parker and Kord who are on their search for "proper principles" and "known truths," The Question has completed his quest for those intangibles, and his adventures, like those of Mr. A, are better understood as allegorical intellectual exercises. The Question serves as an avatar who guides the reader through a series of thought experiments where the hero must apply the fantastic courage he displays in fighting crime to his mundane existence. Put differently, *the question*, posed by the actions of Vic Sage is: what makes a hero? The power of his fists? Or strength of his integrity?

In addressing that question, Ditko strips away from Vic Sage, and later Mr. A, much of the depth that he painstakingly developed for characters like Peter Parker, making Vic Sage avatar—a sort of Platonic ideal.[44] As an ideal form, The Question is then held up as a mirror for supporting characters to be identified as imperfect reflections. Within Ditko's Question stories, those imperfect supporting characters then have to make a choice about whether or not they will choose a path towards the ideal or away from it. The conflict, or lack thereof, that each of the supporting cast members experience creates the dramatic tension, as opposed to the actions taken and words spoken by the ideal form, in this case The Question/Vic Sage. The Question, then, is not to be read as a character; he is a fully formed idea—a state of mind—that other characters, and the reader, respond to. It's no wonder, then, that Ditko chose to name The Question's alter ego "Sage." Although Ditko's dialogue and narration boxes make The Question's emblematic position clear, he also achieves this through visual representation as well. Whether as Vic Sage or The Question, the character is always illustrated with excellent posture, with his head held high, shoulders set back, and his expression content. This element of The Question's character is given even more emphasis as Ditko frequently illustrates him as being jeered at by a mob of slouching, dumpy, angry, and often-pointing figures, demonstrating how the masses respond when presented with the very idea of what Ditko defines as heroism. (figures 5.3 and 5.4)

The visual and narrative-philosophic tropes Ditko presents in *Mysterious Suspense* are a hallmark of the artist's post-Marvel work as he sharpens his philosophic perspective. For instance, the indictment of the mob that is readily available in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, by this point, has been refined to a distinct kind of staging that appears throughout Ditko's later works: the singular, ideal hero flanked by jeering, angry faces or a confusion of chaotic, formless shapes or both. Moreover, this is visual philosophic representation was one that Ditko also mapped onto some of his later work-for-hire art, including a Superman pin-up he contributed to the 400th issue of *Superman*.[45] (figure 5.6) These visual motifs embody Ditko's answer to what makes a hero; indeed, these elements literalize, in some ways, Ditko's argument that a hero is one "who faces up to the challenges and obstacles of life and acts on them in a manner that does credit to himself and the proper principles that have proven to be true."[46] That Vic Sage, the avatar for this ideal, is a hard-hitting investigative reporter points the reader towards the ongoing thematic in Ditko's work that "truth" is a byproduct of a ruthless interrogation of all that exists.

Throughout the story in *Mysterious Suspense,* that ruthless interrogation is a costly practice, and his job at the television station that broadcasts his reports is threatened. Sage refuses to accept tainted money from a corrupt businessman in the form of sponsorship dollars, and this sets into motion the drama of the story as Sage's supporting cast must respond to his unwavering convictions. Most, of course, position themselves against Sage because they hate what he stands for and/or they fear that he'll be rewarded and thus given some kind of inter-office authority over them. This outward resentment towards Sage, and the desire for his failure present the reader the kind of person who "refuses to know what is right or deliberately accepts, or does, what he knows is wrong," and this self-defeating attitude proves—not to be the professional but the personal—undoing of Sage's enemies at the station. However, characters like Nora, who is a part of Sage's staff at the station, and Sage's boss, Mr. Starr respond to Sage in very different way, representing a more reasoned approach—neither distrust Sage but neither is blindly loyal. Both of parse out the information that Sage and ultimately side with him because he has made a convincing case without appeals to popular opinion, money, or neck-saving of any kind. And while neither Nora nor Starr face any kind of social or personal consequences, Sage does. His story is scooped by another reporter who takes credit not just for Sage's reporting but for his convictions, and when Sage passes him in the hall, the other reporter literally breaks into a cold sweat fearing a confrontation with Ditko's symbol of truth and reason. (figure 5.7)

At the end of the issue, Vic Sage can claim a victory, but not publicly because the scoop robs that particular outcome from him. Instead of being spiteful towards the reporter who stole his story, Sage seems at peace, confident in the karmic retribution that runs throughout Ditko's work noting that the other reporter "is building his own trap and he'll find himself caught in it!"[47] What is implicit is that the components of that trap are failures of the mind and a negative response to the world as it is and the truth it reveals. The victory, then, that Sage claims is security in the knowledge that public perception is not what informs character but rather an internal sturdiness and a personal sense of accomplishment. The story closes with a final narration box, informing the reader that the achievement of victory comes after one "has honestly applied himself to the task facing him and having overcome it…is secure in that knowledge…the fruits of that goal belong to him! He will know…no one else matters!"[48] It is the power of the mind alone that makes such securities, and operating as a state of mind, Sage provides that security for those, like Nora and Starr, who have embraced the precepts he offers. The cost for Sage, if it can be considered as such, is that he must accept his victories without recognition or social acceptance, but this is mitigated by the small the small social circle he maintains that does recognize what he has done.

In the pages of *Blue Beetle*, Ted Kord joins that social circle as he is also confronted with the ideal form, The Question. Kord first meets Vic Sage in *Blue Beetle* #5 in a story titled "The Destroyer of Heroes" that features a supporting cast seemingly pulled right from *The Fountainhead*, and it's instances such as this that has led many a reader of Ditko's work to reduce his work as a parroting of Objectivism. This is especially true as the story includes an art critic name Boris Ebar, who is an Ellsworth Toohey analog, and although Vic Sage serves the narrative role of John Galt, he appears more as an artistic representation of Howard Roark, "tall and gaunt"[49] and complete with "ripe orange rind" colored hair.[50] In Ditko's story, Kord and Sage meet at an art gallery where there are two rival statues on display: the first is "Our Man," a misshapen lump that eschews what Ebar refers to as the "grotesque, heroic pose" and has a hollowed-out place where the figure's heart should be[51]; the second statue is called "The Unconquered" and appears to be a reference to the statue from *The Fountainhead.* Kord refers to the latter as "signif[ying…]something deeper. […] That man is not helpless,"[52] just as Roark explains that the statue he commissioned should represent "[t]he human spirit. The heroic in man."[53]

Sage and Kord bond over their defense of the statue in the face of those who would ostensibly slander it and Romantic notions about man's heroic potential. As the Blue Beetle, Kord visits the gallery to defend "The Unconquered" against those who would deface and destroy it. Eventually he finds himself in a battle against the sculptor of "Our Man," who has made a suit of armor out of his statue and is on a rampage to destroy all heroic images. Blue Beetle tracks the menace all over Hub City, and throughout the chase and eventual battle, Ditko applies his mystic liberal philosophy, and its incorporation of Objectivist elements, to explain the role of the superhero and what the existence of such a figure *must* mean in order to be of any merit. However, much of this explanation comes by way of presenting counter examples through Our Man, Boris Ebar, and their ilk. Like Spider-Man and The Question, Blue Beetle is detested by the public, who adores the malformed Our Man and the mindlessness he represents in the story.

Throughout the chase, Blue Beetle is threatened by a mob of unkempt (none of them are wearing shoes) hippies who call him a brute and pummel him with rocks, to which Blue Beetle responds, "Now there's a frightening example of pure emotionally driven action!"[54] (figure 5.8) Rather than speaking to the reader, *ála* the narrator in *Mysterious Suspense*, Blue Beetle distinguishes the violence he is taking part in from those who are hurling rocks at him; the key differential being the lack of controlled thought expressed by the mob of hippies. But Ditko does not just level his cannon at hippies: Boris Ebar is erudite, well-dressed, and speaks eloquently of class and the everyman—yet Ditko presents ideas as calculated but intellectually bankrupt, leading to a group to believe that "man can feel better than he can think" and for the sculptor (and alter ego) of Our Man view himself as "merely an instrument of some unknown force. I cannot question it…I can only obey its commands."[55] In each instance with the mob, Ebar, and sculptor, those characters operate both as an antithesis to the kind of heroism Ditko pushes and as a compliment to the narrative operations of those found in *Mysterious Suspense*. With the exception of the Blue Beetle, each of the supporting characters in this story—Boris Ebar, Our Man/the sculptor, the mob, and The Question—are ideal forms that Ted Kord must respond to in order to self-actualize. He must make a determination about the kind of person he chooses to be: one who rules by way of his mind, or one who is ruled by emotion and unknown forces.

While Kord struggles in symbolic battle with the submissive, anti-mind of Our Man, Vic Sage is amongst a crowd of onlookers watching the battle. Over a four-panel sequence, someone from the mob of hippies fires a gun at Blue Beetle in order to protect Our Man. Attacking the would-be assassin, Sage says, "That self-made idiot! He's refused to use his mind for so long he has nothing to check his impulses!" And as he kicks and punches the man, he chides him with, "Because you deliberately turned yourself into a mental cripple…that doesn't excuse your actions!" Then, when the man asks why Sage kicked him, Sage responds, "Since you won't think, I'll tell you! Your feelings don't determine anything! Especially the life of a human being!"[56] It is the very refusal to think and employ the positive, productive energy of one's mind that is the deciding factor in what led the shoeless-hippie. A moment like this is also an example of what Ditko would later refer to as "anti-life:" the rejection reason, principles, and thought in favor of the supposed unreason of emotion leading to an attempted murder. "The Destroyer of Heroes" story, then, is an opening remark to a larger discourse that will be explored in the next chapter.

After the eventual defeat of Our Man in combat, the closing panels of the story show Ted Kord—and, thus, his antecedent in Peter Parker—making his choice for self-actualization. Speaking to his girlfriend and lab partner, Tracey, Kord says what carried him to victory was the impression in his mind of “The Unconquered.” “I was fighting for everything it stood for,” Kord says. He defeated Our Man because he believed in “[w]hatever it took to make [“The Unconquered”]…whatever it takes to achieve anything worthwhile! It can only be done by struggling to succeed!”[57] Amongst the available options, Kord has made his choice, and it is one of wholeheartedness. The final panels of the story first feature the sculptor of “Our Man” who is, as Peale might describe, “inwardly afraid…shrink[ing] from life…[and] suffer[ing] from a deep sense of inadequacy and insecurity.”[58] Glumly staring at the audience, the sculptor thinks to himself, “we can achieve nothing. We are doomed to failure before we try.”[59] But the final panel of the story might be described as more uplifting, as it centers on an unknown student who, just as Ted Kord was inspired by his encounter with Vic Sage and “The Unconquered,” was inspired by what he saw in Blue Beetle to struggle for the improvement of his mind.

Officially, *Blue Beetle* was cancelled after issue five,[60] but it is probably fair to project an imaginary world where Ted Kord continued to grow and develop into the ideal hero, like the one Ditko presents in Question and the even harder hitting Mr. A. However, it is not just the hardline idealism and iconoclastic nature of The Question and Mr. A that makes them so striking. Rather, it is their willingness to perform acts of violence seldom seen in post-Comics Code publications. These characters act on what Ditko refers to as “the right to kill,” and in *Mr. A* #1, Ditko explains that this right can only be exercised against those who initiate force against others and thereby renounce their right to life.[61] For Ditko, the right to kill is in response to the symbolic battle between "life" and "anti-life" that is at the heart of the struggles faced by Spider-Man and the Blue Beetle, and the intellectual rationale that underwrites the confidence The Question has in his interactions with the world. In the fantasy world of Ditko's superheroes, the right to kill is this basic premise that justifies the actions of any vigilante hero against criminals, not altruism. Working from that premise, Ditko begins to significantly challenge the status quo in superhero comics, beginning with his independently produced works and those released through Charlton.

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[1] Horowitz, *One Simple Idea* pp. 91, 97

[2] Steve Ditko, *Masters of Comic Book Art*, directed by Ken Viola, Rhino Home Video, 1987.

[3] Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Signet, 1975), 109.

[4] Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*, 42

[5] I am using "Silver Age" as a historical denotation that identifies a thematic and artistic shift in the production of superhero comics that begins with the 1956 release of DC Comics' *Showcase* #4. The precise closing date for the Silver Age is debated among comics historians and scholars; however, the general consensus is that the era closes in the early 1970s, and work done by comics scholar Peter Coogan argues that 1970 is the end of the era in his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Scholars such as Geoff Klock push the Silver Age as late as 1986. However, as we will see, the major shifts that build toward some of the publications of the mid-1980s (*Watchmen, Daredevil: Born Again, Dark Knight Strikes Again*) have their narrative roots in the superhero comics that Steve Ditko produced from 1962-1972. Finally, it is worth noting that Benjamin Woo argues effectively in "An Age-Old Problem: Problematics of Comics Historiography" that comics "ages" are almost always unstable, even if they are occasionally useful. Further, such "ages" are bound to a historical narrative about comics that focuses entirely on the superhero genre, neglecting the myriad other genres which regularly outsold superhero comics at various historical moments.

[6] Indeed, when Ditko first took the Spider-Man job, it was uncertain that the character would endure beyond *Amazing Fantasy* #15, but the popularity of the character allowed him to continue beyond *Amazing Fantasy* and into *Amazing Spider-Man*. Ditko began working on Spider-Man in 1962 and created Dr. Strange in 1963, the only other character for whom he had a sustained run at Marvel.

[7] Another potential criticism of Ditko employing the "epic" form is the role that seriality plays in the publication of the story. However, where Ditko's work is set apart is that during his tenure on *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Ditko—even though he was producing panel scripts with dialogue—was not necessarily in complete control of the final content of word balloons or narration boxes as edited by Stan Lee, but Ditko was in control over the visual narrative, which allowed him to put Peter Parker through his paces. Additionally, as Ditko gained more accurate, if not complete, credit and creative control for plotting, the serialized elements are pushed further back as the narrative becomes a more unified voice and vision. The character begins to work within arcs instead of simply "one and done" stories. Moreover, once Ditko leaves Marvel to produce superhero comics at Charlton, he has almost total control over the narrative and character arcs (aside from the Comics Code), again disrupting the notion that serialization would necessarily be problematic. What is key here is that the framework that Ditko was working within was not necessarily co-equal with the types of narratives of contemporary works or even the kinds of pre-

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superhero stories Ditko had produced at Marvel. His work on Spider-Man, Blue Beetle, The Question, and Mr. A fit within a context unique for 1960s and early 1970s. While certainly not a one-to-one comparison, one might consider serialization of these specific works by Steve Ditko in the same way that one would consider the serialization modern comics stories that are long-form tales but broken into installments.

[8] Umberto Eco's article 'The Myth of Superman' offers a counterpoint to this perspective where he briefly suggests that the reader *can* self-identify with the character of Superman though the character's alter-ego Clark Kent. This is not the focus of Eco's article, but it does force the question of whether or not Spider-Man *really* was different from other heroes of the era. Writing in 1972, Eco makes a fascinating and compelling case; however, it seems to neglect that Clark Kent is the mask for Superman, not the other way around. It is Superman who is the pretender, and Clark Kent is the construct Superman has developed to disguise himself among humanity. Even if the reader is able to identify with Superman through Kent, as Eco suggests and concedes, the reader is identifying with the *costume* of a shambling, nervous, nebbish-like character, not the robust, confident hero, Superman. In the case of Peter Parker, there is no clear distinction between the identity of Peter Parker and the identity of Spider-Man, only the costume. The character of Superman plays a convincing Clark Kent; Spider-Man is not playing Peter Parker: he *is* Peter Parker.

[9] Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," *Diacritics* 2, no. 1 (1972): 22.

[10] Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, *The Amazing Spider-Man Omnibus* (New York: Marvel, 2016), 10.

[11] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 890-898.

[12] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 945-947. Another—I think viable—way to read the interaction Peter has at the Daily Bugle offices is to put them in the context is Ditko's own working conditions at Marvel and the relationships he had there. As an exceedingly brief example, in *Amazing Spider-Man* #25, Peter attempts to sell some photographs of Spider-Man assisting the police thwart some car thieves. Jameson doesn't want the pictures because they don't actually show Spider-Man but rather his Spider-signal guiding the cops towards the criminals. Peter then explains why the shots are valuable to Jameson because they actually make Spider-Man look bad because he couldn't stop a couple of hoods on his own. Jameson realizes that's a great angle for his purposes, and immediately takes credit for the idea in a way all-too-similar to Stan Lee to be overlooked. In fact, Jameson's complaints about Spider-Man not actually being photographed in action are similar to the perceptibly sarcastic narration boxes Lee wrote for *Amazing Spider-Man* #18, an issue that featured no combat with a foe but was instead about Peter dealing with his personal life and a grave illness for Aunt May. But this relationship between freelancer and editor that seems to parallel the interplay between Ditko and Lee, at least as Ditko and others have described their working relationship with Lee. Another interesting case is with Betty Brant and the ups and downs of Peter's romantic relationship with her. As the office secretary at The Daily Bugle, Betty seems to be a stand-in for Flo Steinberg, the secretary at the Marvel office and a pivotal figure in the company's early days (see: *Alter Ego*, no. 153 (July 2018) for an extended look at Steinberg's contributions). Photographs of Steinberg from the period bear an uncanny resemblance to Ditko's rendering of Betty Brant, and Steinberg, along with Sol Brodsky, would have been Ditko's main point of contact in the Marvel offices—especially after Ditko and Lee stopped speaking to one another. Even more intriguingly, in the September 2019 issue of *Alter Ego*, Bernie Bubnis writes of his time with Ditko in the 1960s, and he recounts an anecdote about Ditko asking Steinberg to lunch, which she rejected. Bubnis then says that, years later, he asked Steinberg whether or not Ditko had asked her on other dates, to which she said, "Probably, but times were different then. You didn't date fellow employees," and, according to Bubnis, Steinberg then went on to say that she probably would not have gone out with him anyway (see: Bernie Bubnis, "'A Life Lived on His Own Terms,'" *Alter Ego*, no. 160 (September 2019): 40). This is an intriguing bit of information as it seems to inform the relationship between Peter and Betty in the Daily Bugle office, along with Peter's eventual heart-breaking acceptance, in *Amazing Spider-Man* #30, that for as much as he cared about Betty, there was just not a future for them together. I feel compelled to acknowledge how speculative these connections are, and that along with a reticence about relying on anecdotal evidence

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from second and third parties led me to move these connections to a note. However, the coincidences, I believe, are too profound to not, at least, be mentioned.

[13] Gail Wynand is a particularly apt comparison in this case, and the similarities he shares with J. Jonah Jameson seem more than coincidental. Jameson is a powerful newspaper/tabloid publisher that opposes everything that Peter Parker stands for and the acts he performs as Spider-Man. In *The Fountainhead,* Wynand is a powerful tabloid publisher who opposes the moral values that Howard Roark claims for himself. In addition, both the characters of Jameson and Wynand are conflicted – or as Rand and Ditko might say, of mixed premises – and both characters are strong willed and refuse to bend to the whims of others, until their backs are against the wall. Where the two diverge is that Jameson's *The Daily Bugle* is an extension of his very being, and Wynand's publication, *The Banner*, does not reflect Wynand's privately held beliefs.

[14] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 890.

[15] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 892.

[16] Rand, *The Romantic*, vi.

[17] Rand, *The Romantic*, 103.

[18] Rand, *The Romantic*, 99.

[19] Rand, *The Romantic*, 103.

[20] Rand, *The Romantic*, 107-109.

[21] Ditko makes this point explicit through the voice of Ted Kord, the Blue Beetle, in *Blue Beetle* #5.

[22] Quoted in Horowitz, *One Simple Idea* p. 97

[23] Steve Ditko, "The Destroyer of Heroes!," *Blue Beetle*, no. 5 (November 1968): 4.

[24] Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 2014), 128.

[25] Steve Ditko, "Violence: The Phoney Issue," *Guts no. 5*, 1969, 26.

[26] Quoted in Horowitz, *One Simple Idea* p. 97

[27] Rand, *The Romantic*, 106.

[28] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 564.

[29] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 537.

[30] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 564.

[31] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 565.

[32] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 566.

[33] *Mysterious Suspense*, no. 1 (October 1968): 2..

[34] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 566.

[35] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 577. Emphasis original.

[36] Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 41.

[37] Ditko, *Masters of Comic*.

[38] With the exception of his essays on violence and the philosophic nature of characters, such as Mr. A, Ditko is notoriously silent when it comes to speaking about his work. He has not participated in a published interview since 1966. Even in Ditko's revealing essays and critiques on the history of comics and the creation of certain characters, the artist rarely reveals substantial information about his (non-philosophic) narrative intent or the kind of structural strategies he has employed, preferring that his art speak for itself. This places the critic in the difficult position of gleaning Ditko's narrative intent from the direct textual evidence and melding with what is demonstrable about his artistic and literary influences. Untangling this web is no small task, but there are other anecdotal and peripheral pieces of evidence that are helpful if not ideal. For example, in Jonathan Ross's *In Search of Steve Ditko*, Alan Moore offers an oft-repeated anecdote about an incident where Ditko was asked about what he thought about Moore's character, Rorschach, from *Watchmen*. Reportedly, Ditko said he knew the character and that "he's like Mr. A, except insane." There are two distinct layers to this story that are significant for the purposes of

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my analysis. The first is that Moore's story itself tacitly acknowledges that Mr. A and the Question are effectively interchangeable, demonstrating that Ditko is in the habit of repeating and extending the narratives of characters across publications as has been noted by professional peers. Second, if true, this anecdote is an instance of Ditko openly conflating the two characters, and Ditko seems to assume that it was the latter version and/or there is no significant feature that distinguishes one from the other. Even if Ditko is *not* acknowledging that these characters are effectively the same, that the two are so easily conflated by both Moore and *Ditko* is still a demonstration that he carries his narratives between characters.

[39] Steve Ditko, *The Action Heroes*, DC Archives (New York: DC Comics, 2007), 2: 335.

[40] Ditko and Lee, *The Amazing*, 957.

[41] Ditko, *The Action*, 2: 347.

[42] Peale, *The Power*, 87.

[43] *Mysterious Suspense*, 2; 9. Emphasis added.

[44] Of course, I recognize the perceptible incongruity of associating Ditko with Platonic thought given his substantial interest in Aristotelianism, but this strikes me as the most apt philosophic comparison. Further, there is no reason to believe that Ditko would not be interested in or familiar with the metaphysical aspects of idealism that insist reality, lived experience, is a mental construction—a notion that Ditko plays with throughout his works.

[45] Steve Ditko, "[untitled pin-up]," *Superman* 1, no. 400 (October 1984): 41.

[46] *Mysterious Suspense*, 10.

[47] *Mysterious Suspense*, 26.

[48] *Mysterious Suspense*, 26.

[49] Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Plume, 2002), 529.

[50] Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 3.

[51] Ditko, "The Destroyer," 4.

[52] Ditko, "The Destroyer," 2

[53] Rand, *The Fountainhead*, 341.

[54] Ditko, "The Destroyer," 8-9.

[55] Ditko, "The Destroyer," 9-10.

[56] Ditko, "The Destroyer," 17.

[57] Ditko, "The Destroyer," 18.

[58] Peale, *The Power*, 8.

[59] Ditko, "The Destroyer," 18.

[60] An unpublished sixth issue was printed in *The Action Heroes*, DC Archives (New York: DC Comics, 2007), 2.

[61] Steve Ditko, "...Right to Kill!," comic strip, *Mr. A no. 1*, 1973, 25.

THE RIGHT TO KILL

THE QUESTION, MR. A, AND LIFE VERSUS ANTI-LIFE

Somewhere in the sewer system of Crown City, there are likely the drowned corpses of two thugs, their waterlogged and rotting flesh gnawed away by rats and other nasty things. And in the world above that reeking sewer? Hard-hitting investigative journalist Vic Sage rests easy in the knowledge that these men have met such a fate. As The Question, he kicked those men into the rushing waters of the sewer, and even though the thugs begged him for mercy, The Question ignored their pleas and even assured them they deserved their terrible fate. After all, *they* had attempted to murder *him*. When the thugs screamed for The Question to do his heroic "duty" and spare their lives, he responded, "Duty? --To whom?"[1] In the late summer of 1967, Charlton comics published "Kill Vic Sage!" as a Question back-up feature in *Blue Beetle* #4. Ditko's radical approach to presenting violence and philosophy in comics reverberated with contemporaries, angered some fans, and laid the groundwork for increasingly violent and "relevant" comics of the 1970s and 1980s.

Major contributors to the comics scene of those decades, such as Jim Starlin and Denny O'Neil, have made special note of Ditko's work as being significantly different from other comics being released at the time. Starlin specifically cites the Question scene above as one that stuck with him[2] and O'Neil is quick to point out that whatever philosophic and political differences he and Ditko had, Ditko appeared to be writing for a much older audience than his contemporaries were.[3] Ditko's work seems to demand that readers be able to operate in at least two different registers: one that is the surface level that presents straightforward facts about the characters and a secondary register that his stories should also be read for their non-literal philosophic explorations. These significant differences would prove influential to later artists and writers, and Ditko's approach to violence as a means of exploring philosophic matters marked a major turning point in American comics—a sort of "death of the Silver Age."

Whereas current superhero comics routinely feature violent heroes and amoral anti-heroes, Silver Age superhero comics balked at depicting such violence. If villains died, it was through no real fault of the hero, or the circumstances were so mysterious as to make it almost impossible to tell if characters had truly met their demise. Heroes were expected to save the lives of innocents, but they were also expected to *spare* and even *save* the lives of their murderous enemies—even if it meant endangering the hero's own life. Working within a mystic liberal paradigm, along with fine tuning the dark karmic impulses of his earlier work, Ditko disabused himself of these merciful heroes in the late 1960s after leaving Marvel, contending through the character of Mr. A, "to have any sympathy for a killer is to insult their victims."[4] In crafting The Question story above, Ditko does not force his character to merely reject the altruistic code of squeaky-clean Silver Age superheroes; he refuses to even acknowledge the *existence* of mercy in his hero's mindset. As presented by The Question, what good reason does a hero have to "risk his neck" for the likes of his would-be killers?

First published in the same year as "Kill Vic Sage!," Mr. A also takes a more direct approach when, in *witzend* #3 (published by Wallace Wood), the character allows a crook to plummet to his death. (figure 6.1) The actions of Mr. A and The Question were jaw-dropping for Ditko's contemporaries, and the criticism he received led him to defend the act of outright killing, or indifferently allowing villains to die, as the hero's "right to kill." However, before getting into Ditko's defense of this "right," In defining the intellectual parameters for the "right to kill," Ditko attempted to expunge any perceived sense of moral grayness from the violent actions of his characters. Ditko attempted to achieve this through what he identified as "a dramatic presentation revealing [a] character's choices and actions that identify them and lead to a just ending where a hero and a right view of life wins."[5] Of course, that "right view" is one Ditko saw as being wholly rational and measured by clear, non-contradictory standards. Indeed, this dramatization reflects the mind-power movement I've associated with mystic liberalism in that Ditko's approach and mind-power advocates alike attempt to address the question, as Horowitz identifies, of what mental forces exert "an invisible pull on a person's daily life."[6] In examining the right to kill, Ditko identifies those invisible, nagging mental forces as a persistent moral dilemma between right and wrong, and it's only by sorting out this internal, mental issue that the hero is afforded the right, gaining access to a higher power, one that offers a "better justice than the prevailing legal moral one."[7]

This extralegal mind-power approach to justice is in keeping with Ditko's Romantic vision of the hero as nascent heroes, like Spider-Man and the Blue Beetle, progress on an intellectual journey towards some sort of narrative completion point—the actualization of the self and higher state of being. To that end, the actions of Ditko's characters should not be seen as the result of snap decisions, narrative convenience, or the desire to produce more violent comics; rather, they were the product of Ditko’s own sense of moral judgment and sense of reason he drew from his own distinct philosophic outlook. Like many a (liberal) mystic before him, Ditko’s approach is autodidactic and dissociates with those ideas prescribed by authorities in favor of rationalizing a closure between a metaphysical “is” and “ought.” In other words, the notion of life is the ultimate end for Ditko’s characters where the right to kill is in play, and whatever might put that end at hazard ought to be eliminated. Rather than advocating murder, it’s a parabolic exercise where one’s own thinking about the preservation of self-esteem, and what informs that esteem, is called into question. Ditko’s right to kill asks: are one’s thoughts responsible not just for one’s actions but one’s continued existence?

Few of Ditko’s contemporaries parsed the nuances and attempted dialectic found in his early post-Marvel comics. Actions like those of The Question kicking criminals into a sewer ran counter to what was permissible in other Code-approved comics, and the constraints of the Code demanded that Ditko’s unambiguous death scene have a tacked-on text pretending that the criminals’ fate was somehow mysterious. Dissatisfied with such creative restrictions, Ditko directly responded to the restraints of the Code in 1973’s *Mr. A* #1, which featured a story titled “…Right to Kill!” This story was introduced by a brief essay on the matter where Ditko says, “[h]ow a man will live—if he deserves to live—follows from how he uses his faculty for survival: *reason.*” In other words, personhood, the right to life, is first dependent upon one’s willingness to reason, to think. In a mystic liberal sense, this notion of Ditko’s squares with New Thought advocate Napoleon Hill’s urging to his readers that “[they] will never be greater than the thoughts that dominate [their] mind[s]."[8]

In a Ditkovian sense, if one's mind is cluttered with irrational and contradictory thoughts, then, in a non-literal sense, personhood cannot be fully achieved, thus relinquishing one's life. However, by engaging with mind-power, and not just positive thoughts but reasoned, rational thoughts, then one can (re)gain that life. Only those who have rejected reason and positive mind-power are likely to initiate force against others, because they lack the ability to attract and create positive outcomes for themselves. The reason-less, in Ditko's view, are still wont to achieve material and emotional gain for themselves, which results in violence against others. Ditko goes on to clarify that anyone who has initiated force against others thereby renounces reason and forfeits any claim to his life.[9] For Ditko, the hero is not one who initiates force, but *retaliates* against it. Moreover, the hero is not obligated to save or defend the life of *anyone* who initiates force. Ditko offers a clear example of his polemic in the "…Right to Kill!" story that follows.

In this story, a little girl has been kidnapped and is being held for ransom; once the kidnappers receive the ransom money, they decide to kill the girl in an effort to secure their getaway. Mr. A enters and pummels the kidnappers, shooting one in the head. Mr. A then rescues the little girl, leaving her surviving kidnappers to writhe in anguish and presumably die from injuries they inflicted on each other in their attempt to escape. Although *Mr. A* was published independently, as a result of Ditko's general rejection of the undue influence of others and outsiders on the individual mind and what it creates, and thus was not subject to the Code's authority, it's worth noting that Ditko violates four of the Code's provisions on one page alone. (figure 6.2) If Mr. A and the "…Right to Kill!" feature were subject to the Comics Code, at minimum, the following Code provisions would have been violated:

- "No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime."
- "Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated."
- "The crime of kidnapping shall never be portrayed in any detail, nor shall any profit accrue to the abductor or kidnapper. The criminal or the kidnapper must be punished in every case."
- "All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism, shall not be permitted."

Like the earlier Question story, the villains beg for mercy and accuse Mr. A of being inhuman when he refuses to help them. When the little girl asks Mr. A why he won't save the lives of her suffering kidnappers, he responds that he "treat[s] people the way they act toward human life." And that "[he] grant[s] them what their actions *deserve* [and] have *earned.*"[10]

Ditko's line of reasoning should have a familiar ring to it: it tracks with the dark karma of his early horror and suspense stories and the reasoning that was injected into the zeitgeist by Blavatsky, and folds in neatly with the writing of Nathaniel Branden and his claims that thoughts create character. Ditko's rationale—along with Branden's, in particular—reflects mystic liberalism's interest in the more mystical side by way of

New Thought and the “Law of Attraction,” a term given its contemporary usage by Prentice Mulford in *Your Forces, And How to Use Them* (1892). In essence, the Law of Attraction insists that the mind, and therefore individuals, are in an ongoing negotiation with reality where the bargaining chips are one’s own thoughts. Whatever circumstances one faces, according to the Law of Attraction, result from the mental state of the individual facing those circumstances. Like Ditko’s push to beat back irrationality and wrong-thinking, if one is able to maintain appropriate control over their thoughts, then they will attract good fortune.

However, if one is unable to control their thoughts, giving in to negativity or something branded as immorality or irrationality, then they place their fortunes, their relationships, their lives at hazard. It’s important to note that not all believers and proponents of the Law of Attraction accepted, fully contended with, or even considered this destructive potentiality, but it is certainly present and has routinely been addressed by critics of New Thought. The dark karma of Ditko, as informed by Blavatsky and later buttressed by Branden, embraces these negative elements and puts them to apparently productive use in the service of mystic liberalism’s pursuit of rational justice.

To insist that criminals and villains deserve to die, and then have heroes purposefully follow through on that insistence, were not actions or words that would be permitted of Captain America, Batman, or even Ditko’s own creations like Spider-Man or Dr. Strange, but they were the words and actions of what Ditko defined as a genuine, rational hero—or at least the artistic representation of one. It is true that superheroes did kill with impunity in the pre-Comics Code era—Superman threw crooks off of buildings, Batman punched a man into a vat of acid and shot a sleeping vampire to death, and in Robin's first appearance, the young boy knocked a crook off a skyscraper with his slingshot—but the industry had been moving away from such violence years before the Code, and those killings were largely forgotten or disregarded once the Comics Code was in place. Such actions by comic-book superheroes had become objects of scorn and were nearly unthinkable, thanks not just to Fredric Wertham but to the longstanding impositions of in-house editorial guidelines developed at the most powerful comics publishers, like DC Comics.[11]

As a result of the anti-killing, post-Code attitude, Ditko found himself defending not only the right for heroes to kill, but also fantasy violence in general, claiming that force and the initiation of force "is the real issue and evil." For Ditko, "[s]topping violence would solve nothing"[12] since the real problem was volitional and philosophic.

What's more, by couching his sense of justified fantasy violence in choice—the choice one makes to adopt an anti-life mentality—Ditko again aligns himself with the mind-power elements of mystic liberalism, where, as New Thought mystics like Warren Felt Evans or later proponents like Neville Goddard would likely argue, thought and imagination create reality. It's not that Evans, Goddard, or most other mind-power advocates weaponized thought as a means—even if theoretical—for eliminating violent criminals. But the blending of Blavatsky's sense of karma, and her direct influence on New Thought, make such justifications available. Furthermore, the Randian ingredients that Ditko adds to this stew work to temper the use of violence by clarifying that the hero did not have a right to initiate force but only to retaliate against it in equal measure. Unfortunately, at the time, the Comics Code did not share Ditko's nuanced approach and was not equipped to regulate that kind of complexity.

In a 1969 essay entitled "Violence: The Phoney [*sic*] Issue," Ditko further dismisses criticism of violence by reiterating his position about retaliation versus initiation and pointing out that violence in the arts is fictitious and done in a "controlled make-believe atmosphere." He also asserts that violence in the arts is not responsible for real-life violence perpetrated by "people who choose to *initiate* force." Furthermore, "[t]hose profiteers of *initiated* force can never be sure of holding onto anything they possess, including their lives."[13] Ditko isn't attempting to reduce an acceptance of violent actions to a childish "he started it!" argument. Rather, he's attempting to demonstrate through fiction that, philosophically and morally, individuals have a right to use force against those who would attempt to strip them of their rights, lives, or property. Ditko reinforces this stance, referring to Aristotle, insisting that "Art is philosophically more important than History. History tells how men did act. *Art shows how men could and should act.*"[14]

In other words, verisimilitude in his work is not about historical reality or whether everyday people should be dropping criminals from rooftops. Ditko is instead speaking in the register of philosophic, idealistic truths—ones that are experienced more than they are tangibly measured. A part of the appeal for those philosophic truths is dependent on a sense of karmic retaliation—as well as villainy being the product of internal, mental corruption. Violence, then, places the more ethereal notion of dark karma into mundane practicability. Because the machinations of karma and "mental science” are running in the background, the right to retaliatory force is extended beyond personal injury. The result is that the individual has a right to use force against *anyone* who initiates force against *anyone* else.

THE REAL HORROR

That the right to kill is as much about philosophic truth as it is about the literal forfeiture of life by those who “choose” irrationality or evil adds a dimension of cosmic intraspace to the concept. In a symbolic sense, the right to kill is translatable to an internal, intellectual exorcism as well as a social one. In order for one to gain access to the right, then, that person must first expel his or her own demons, or at least learn to identify and contend with them in a positive, rational way that leads to intellectual clarity. One of the most striking visual representations of internal fortitude needed to access the right to kill occurs in a double page spread printed in *Mr. A* #1, which first appeared as the cover to *The Collector* noted above. (figure 6.3)

Although the right is, of course, explored throughout *Mr. A* #1, this spread presents Mr. A walking down an uncluttered path toward the reader away from Mr. A’s signature black and white card, and the path appears to emit from the *inside* of that card. As Mr. A marches on, he is surrounded by chaos and despair as those who have chosen irrationality—anti-life—writhe and scream in horrific contorted positions, wrapped in words that reveal the actions resulting from their evil, or even morally gray, thoughts. That their thoughts created this hell for them is made clear by the text that sits just below Mr. A on the path. Dripping with Randian vocabulary and sentiment, the reader is assured that “men can choose to be dishonest, corrupt, but that choice only leads to evil—to self-destruction!" In other words, by pursuing such thoughts, practitioners of evil have chosen death, and only by choosing the thoughts that result in consistent, right, rational principles—according to Mr. A—can one choose life.

Unlike the more literal, internal cosmic quests of Dr. Strange, characters like Mr. A fall in line with the ostensibly more realistic world of characters like Spider-Man and the Blue Beetle, where the plumbing of psychic depths is presented by more practically useful, if not still theoretical, means. The visual depiction of Ditko's theoretical rhetoric is dramatic, to say the least. But the stark contrast between right and wrong as he presents it moves the cosmic search for the self—the rational self—away from the fantastic, as presented by the conflict amongst Dr. Strange, Dormammu, and the Mindless Ones. Mr. A places this conflict between volitional good and volitional evil, as they battle for the intellectually incomplete, the nonhuman, into a more practical frame. Again, the search for truth is less literal than it is theoretical, but the more mundane setting of Mr. A and the more practical terminology of what defines good and evil refine Ditko's dialectical approach, making dark karma more tangible by way of retaliatory violence.

By establishing a difference between retaliatory violence and the initiation of force/violence, Ditko demarcates the actions of his heroes from those characters that he sees as less heroic. Ditko contends that even if there was a marked increase in societal violence as compared to previous decades, it was not related to violence in the arts; it was a corollary and direct result of individuals *choosing* philosophic and moral incompetence. Moreover, Ditko's philosophic and moral right to retaliation cannot be properly understood or applied through mere imitation of fictional violence; it must be a product of a particular sense of reason and rationality. Instead of real-world violence being a product of the arts, Ditko takes the reverse position and views the artistic "drama[tization] of man's inevitable weakness" as a byproduct of the intellectual bankruptcy of embracing the initiation of force as he defines it. Through the voice of Vic Sage, Ditko denounces those dramatizations of weakness as being "perfect for self-admitted nothings who have nowhere to go in their world of nothing."[15]

Ditko is unambiguous in his defense of violence in entertainment. After all, it's a philosophic tool in the artist's toolbox; it should be used whenever appropriate. But "appropriate" is the operative term for Ditko, and his appreciation of the use of violence is another matter, limiting it to violence that is used in the service of reason and justice. For those who perpetuate a sort of "irrational violence" in media, Ditko prefers that their ideas are open to rational criticism and eventually defeated in the marketplace of ideas. In a feature titled "Social Justice," which appears in the same issue of *Murder* as "My Brother…," Ditko went on the attack again against those who would blame their own violent actions or the violent actions of criminals on the influence of popular culture. In this satiric story, Ditko does not let the presence of *mindless* violence on television or its correspondent anti-heroes off the hook, but he makes plain that each individual is responsible for his or her actions. As such, no depiction of violence should be forbidden in creative pursuits, even if the creator is operating on ethical and philosophic principles counter to Ditko's own.

Through the voice of Mr. A, the reader is repeatedly informed that an acceptance and practice of morally grey principles is an acceptance of an anti-life frame of mind and a forfeiture of rationality. Ditko challenges the status quo and blind acceptance of what he considered to be popular—but false—ways of thinking that embrace the middle ground and anti-heroes; however, the ways in which his sense of rational violence has been co-opted by artists and writers who followed him do not always fit the mold Ditko cast. Indeed, for as much as Ditko's right to kill fits within the mystic liberal collage and all of mystic liberalism's borrowing and reinterpreting, Ditko's attempt at orthodoxy did anything but stick for those who would follow him, and a common response by later creators is to cherry-pick the rational violence of The Question and Mr. A and merge it with their own philosophy and/or the popular media of their day. In some cases, the end product reads as a criticism to Ditko's work; in others, it represents a sort of evolution of the violent hero. As such, the conjoining of Ditko's "*right* to kill" with other superheroes has created a paradigm shift in the way superheroes have been approached in more recent decades.

The superhero comics that immediately followed The Question and Mr. A began to take on a more serious tone, dealing with street-level concerns (like drug use) and allowed for increased violence as a narrative tool for both heroes and villains. A fair portion of this shift is almost certainly a reflection of the changing societal norms, expectations about readers, and cultural mood of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and this cultural mood created a number of opportunities for individuals to invest in different means of political thought, borrowing from whatever useful elements were available.

The mind-power movement that was embraced by liberal-capitalist thought in the mid-twentieth century and its repurposing as self-esteem by Nathaniel Branden and Ayn Rand was appealing. By embracing this kind of revised liberal thinking, Ditko's work blazes a trail in the American superhero comic and it's his heroes who first *deliberately* kill in this era. It is not clear whether Ditko would have approved of many of the narrative and thematic choices that have since cropped up in comics, and in many cases, it is most likely he would not.

Within the philosophic and narrative structure that Ditko created for his characters, there is room for complexity of thought and deed, but there is no room for a positive view of the anti-hero. Ironically, whatever Ditko's intentions were, by arguing for an acceptance of retaliatory violence, he helped create an entry point for the more violent content and anti-heroes that began to appear in the superhero comics of the early 1970s—characters like the Punisher come immediately to mind. However, according to the Punisher's co-creator, Gerry Conway, the character was based on Don Pendleton's *Executioner* novels, Brian Garfield's *Death Wish* (the 1972 novel, not the film), and early pulp hero The Shadow.[16] But the Punisher, along with later, more bizarre characters, such Foolkiller[17] and The Scourge of the Underworld[18] do point to a larger trend in comics post-Mr. A.

Even though I am confident that there is not sufficient reason to believe that Steve Ditko takes the right to kill as a justification for the literal execution of anyone who violates the rights to life or property of another person, the yields of his figurative explorations of this right trouble many readers, and for good reason. The Punisher, in particular, presents an interesting case. Although I have no reason to believe that Gerry Conway actually entertained any reactionary politics—either now or when he helped develop The Punisher—The Punisher presents an interesting case of the right to kill in action, especially as Conway notes that he was inspired by Brian Garfield's *Death Wish*. Relatedly, there is currently no reason to conjecture that Garfield was at all familiar with Ditko's Mr. A or The Question, but he was active during the same period as Ditko and would have had access to the same zeitgeist as Ditko was drawing from in developing his own philosophy.

Garfield's *Death Wish* is a revenge novel that introduces readers to Paul Benjamin, a left-leaning accountant whose wife and daughter are brutalized by a gang of drug addicts, leading to the death of Paul's wife. Benjamin then takes stock of his life and, resulting from his grief and disillusionment, radically reforms his political views. Adopting a racist, reactionary perspective, Benjamin arms himself and begins murdering drug addicts and criminals in New York City, never actually avenging the crimes committed against his family but managing to murder several African American, Puerto Rican, and white criminals and drug addicts—with the novel making a point to identify Benjamin's views of African Americans. In a scene taking place on New York subway, Benjamin thinks to himself, "*I should have been a Nazi.* … Human cattle most of them: you could see in their faces and bodies they don't deserve life, they had nothing to contribute except the smell unimaginative existences of their wretched carcasses. …they whined their way from cradle to grave. … Exterminate them."[19] The bold white supremacy of the novel is made even more troubling by the fact that it launched the series of films it launched starring Charles Bronson. Further, that this is one of the inspirations for Marvel Comics' The Punisher should unsettle any comics reader partial to the character.

As it relates to the arguments made here, it seems to me that Ditko's exploration of the right to kill, no matter how metaphorical, along with other popular media, contributed to the conditions that made such a character viable in the comics market, not as a villain (as he first appeared) but as an anti-hero—precisely the kind of character that Ditko railed against in essays and letters until his death. Additionally, it is not as though the consequences of heroes-who-kill, like The Punisher, are limited to a small window in the 1970s. And fans know it. In a 2019 comics essay, comics artist Nate Powell addresses this very problem as The Punisher, and his skull-logo, have become symbols of the modern white supremacist movement, "normalizing the language of force," and encroaching fascism promoted by other popular media.[20] Powell's argument is an important and compelling one, and for as much as I think there is a substantial distance between Ditko's intellectual exercises and the issues Powell raises, I cannot, in good conscience, completely divorce them. Superficial misreadings of Ditko's work encourage the kind of violence and politics Powell associates with "aggrieved, insecure white Americans with an exaggerated sense of sovereignty" who have "declared their existence as above the law."

Of course, Ditko alone would not have influenced these characters and ideas, but, Ditko, within the specific medium of comics, had redefined what it meant to be a hero and set a trend that would not just redefine what actions a hero could take but would reshape the comics industry. For writers like Alan Moore, it also means applying a "ferocious moral drive and integrity" to those characters that most embody a Ditkovian spirit,[21] and this is seen in characters like *Watchmen*'s Rorschach, another character often associated with a violent turn in comics. Just as important as that contribution, Moore *reveres* Ditko. Even though Moore's political agenda is very different from Ditko's, at least Ditko felt confident in expressing that agenda, and according to Moore, "that in some ways set him above most of his contemporaries."[22]

The changes Ditko helped usher in can also be witnessed in mainstream comics as well as in the rise of Code-free comic magazines—like those published by Warren and Marvel in their attempt to revive the genres and content found in the comics published by Bill Gaines at EC in the 1950s. The Comics Code even loosened *its* grip during this same period, allowing horror comics to be published more freely. It would be an overstatement to argue that the work of Steve Ditko was directly responsible for those changes; however, the challenges Ditko presented to the superhero status quo and the adoption of his tactics—if not his philosophy—by those creators that followed him appears to be speaking to a paradigm shift in the cultural consciousness. Though most of these changes in comics were gradual, this shift became inescapably clear in the 1980s with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986). Moore created analogs for the characters Ditko had worked on at Charlton and then imposed upon them an extreme, almost parodied version of Ditko's notions of violence—particularly with Rorschach, an emotionally troubled and psychopathic version of The Question/Mr. A.

The violence and drama presented in *Watchmen* is certainly a direct product of the comics of Steve Ditko, and this is true on several different levels—particularly the psychological growth and development of characters, and the right of heroes to kill. As such, it has been criticized and praised for being at the forefront of an era of violent, grim, and gritty comics that attempted to present characters in "real" and "relatable" forms. These were characters that would not be able to escape using extreme violence, and they would not be willing to spare the life of every thief, rapist, and murderer that they encountered; they were characters that had cast moral judgments and dealt with the ramifications of their actions.

These "newly realistic" characters began to appear in long character arcs that simultaneously engrossed the reader and brought about significant internal growth and change for the characters on the page. What is often overlooked is that Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* did not invent this approach; Moore drew clear inspiration from Ditko's superhero output of the 1960s—both at Marvel and Charlton—not just by reimagining Ditko's characters but also by adopting Ditko's longform narrative techniques. What Moore and others mimicked did not appear in superhero comics before Ditko came onto the scene, and they did not exist in any significant sense until a post-Ditko generation of artists and writers, many of whom were Ditko readers and fans, began to dominate the comics industry in the 1970s and early 1980s. The work of Frank Miller along with David Mazzucchelli in *Daredevil: Born Again* (1987) and Miller's work with Klaus Janson and Lynn Varley in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) are other classic examples of this Ditko-influenced, mystic liberal style that took mainstream comics by storm in the 1980s.

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[1] Steve Ditko, *The Action Heroes*, DC Archives (New York: DC Comics, 2007), 2: 276.

[2] Blake Bell, *Strange and Stranger: The World of Steve Ditko* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2008), 112.

[3] Bell, *Strange and Stranger*, 118.

[4] Bell, *Strange and Stranger*, 113.

[5] *Mr. A* #21, p 2.

[6] *One Simple Idea*, p. 5

[7] *Mr. A* #21, p. 2

[8] Napoleon Hill (1997). *Napoleon Hill's Positive Action Plan: 365 Meditations For Making Each Day a Success,* p. 52, Plume

[9] Steve Ditko, "...Right to Kill!,' *Mr. A* no. 1, 1973, 25.

[10] Ditko, "...Right to Kill!," 33.

[11] There are notable exceptions to this, particularly with a publisher like Dell, who had the market power to skirt the Comics Code without jeopardizing their access to distribution. Comics scholar Andrew Kunka has produced convincing research about Dell's publishing practices after the implementation of the Comics Code, noting that not only did the publisher not submit their comics to the Code offices, but they continued publishing crime and horror comics, genres rendered essentially abandoned after the implementation of the Code. Kunka further notes that Dell, particularly in their comics featuring licensed properties—such as now-forgotten-TV-series like *The 87th Precinct*—provided detailed descriptions of drug use, which would have been explicitly forbidden by the Code. Kunka's point is not that Dell flaunted rules they never agreed to; instead, his point is that "Code violations" were not the exclusive domain of independent and underground comics. Nor were such violations inaccessible to a wide readership. However, Kunka is also careful to note that Dell's "Code violations" likely fell under the radar not because of Dell's power as a publisher but because "their tepidly transgressive content was not enough to warrant attention from readers, cultural guardians, and future fans and scholars." To this last point, Ditko is relevant as his transgressions were both aggressive and caught the immediate attention of fans and readers. Andrew Kunka, "Dell Comics and the Comics Code: The Case of The 87th Precinct" (address transcript, 2017 International Comic Arts Forum, Seattle, WA, November 3, 2017).

[12] Steve Ditko, "Violence: The Phoney Issue," *Guts no. 5*, 1969, 24.

[13] Ditko, "Violence: The Phoney Issue," 24-25.

[14] *Mr. A* #21, p. 2; capitalization original, emphasis mine.

[15] Steve Ditko, "The Destroyer of Heroes!," comic strip, *Blue Beetle no. 5*, November 1968, 2.

[16] @gerryconway. "Pendleton was an influence, so was "Death Wish" (the book, not the movie) and, of course, the original pulp avenger, The Shadow." Twitter, 29 Dec. 2016, 11:51 a.m., https://twitter.com/gerryconway/status/814514108947001344

[17] Foolkiller is character created by Steve Gerber and Val Mayerik, and he first appeared in Gerber and Mayerik's *Howard the Duck*. Sadly, Gerber passed away in 2008 long before this project was underway, and I never had the occasion to meet Gerber and ask him about his creations. However, I was able to contact Val Mayerik in 2018, and to his recollection Gerber made no reference to Ditko, Mr. A, or the Question when discussing Foolkiller and his roots with Gerber. However, with exception of their collaboration on *Void Indigo*, Mayerik and Gerber rarely discussed Gerber's ideas in depth, and Mayerik

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was quick to point out that “Steve [Gerber] was well read and a bright guy and would have brought all his knowledge about the world to bear in his writing.”

[18] Admittedly, Scourge was created more as a plot device to thin out Marvel Comics’ cast of villains, and numerous characters have donned the costume and taken up the moniker. However, in appearance and deed, the influence of Ditko and Mr. A seems apparent as he was a character whose sole purpose was to kill supervillains in the name of justice, and he appears to have the strongest visual reference to Mr. A, with his all-white costume.

[19] Brian Garfield, *Death Wish* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2013), 77. Emphasis original.

[20] Nate Powell, "About Face: Death and Surrender to Power in the Clothing of Men," *Popula*, February 24, 2019, accessed August 8, 2019, https://popula.com/2019/02/24/about-face/.

[21] *In Search of Steve Ditko*, BBC Four, September 16, 2007.

[22] Bell, *Strange and Stranger*, 112.

"IF I LIKE IT, I HOPE SOMEBODY ELSE LIKES IT, TOO"

MYSTIC LIBERALISM CONFRONTED IN REAL AND IMAGINED WORLDS

Early on, I noted that one of the inherent challenges to a study like this is that Steve Ditko never, and could never have, identified himself as a mystic liberal. However, that does not preclude his implication and position in a broad set of cultural and political circumstances—circumstances not restrained by the ideological approach of any one mind. To that end, Ditko never identified himself as anything other than the producer of his work. He insisted that he was not "a spokesman" for any particular worldview and that "[he] alone [is] responsible for the views"[1] expressed through his work and in his essays. In a house interview DC Comics conducted to promote *The Creeper*, Ditko famously said, "I never talk about myself. My work is me. I do my best, and if I like it, I hope somebody else likes it, too."[2] That was the extent of Ditko's quoted material in the brief interview. Ditko's tone is gentle and endearing about whatever enjoyment he and his readers get from his work. There's a genuine kindness that offsets, if not belies, the curmudgeonly demeanor often ascribed to Ditko by fans and readers.

There's also something to be said about Ditko's sincerely held belief that his work speaks for itself, needing no additional explanation from him about its intent. While I accept that Ditko need not explain his work to anyone, interpretation and contextualization by readers who want to understand its value and socio-historical context is critical—particularly by those who may not share Ditko's worldview. I include myself in that number. Of course, this is obvious to critics and those familiar with literary, art, and film criticism, but it’s not just comic book critics and scholars that took seriously Ditko’s art and reinterpreted it for a mass audience.

In the 1980s, a number of comic-book series at DC Comics took on the task of both reimagining and critiquing Ditko’s work, particularly the characters DC had acquired from Charlton Comics in 1983: The Question, Blue Beetle, and Captain Atom. According to Ditko and Robin Snyder, DC asked Ditko to submit a proposal for Blue Beetle, which was ultimately rejected.[3] Instead, DC went with an approach to the character that fit within the current superhero-standard, utilizing the creative team of Len Wein, Paris Cullins, and Bruce Patterson. Captain Atom received his own series as well, by Cary Bates and Pat Broderick. While it might be difficult to read an explicit criticism of Ditko into the early Blue Beetle and Captain Atom issues from DC, Dennis O’Neil and Denys Cowan’s reimagined version of The Question is more easily read as a critique of Ditko’s worldview. O’Neil and Cowan’s *The Question* seemed to adopt an interpretation of Ditko’s work as strictly materialist and Objectivist and presented a challenge to that perceived set of politics by introducing a Westernized sense of Zen philosophy into Vic Sage’s story. (In a certain way, this is unintentionally evocative of the operations of mystic liberalism as it appropriates Eastern mysticism in the service of Western values.) However, the most well-known comic to respond to Ditko’s work is Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, and colorist John Higgins’s *Watchmen.*

Production on *Watchmen* began in 1984 with writer Alan Moore, and the series was initially released in twelve issues during 1986 and 1987. Set outside of the traditional DC Comics universe, the comic posits an alternate, dystopian 1985 where superheroes exist in a more realistic world than that of Superman or Batman, with the historical divergence having occurred in 1938 with the release of *Action Comics* #1. It was those first Superman comics that inspired seemingly ordinary people to don garish costumes and fight crime. In the upside-down world of *Watchmen*, the United States won the Vietnam War, the Watergate burglary by members of the Committee to Re-elect the President was never exposed, Richard Nixon retained a stranglehold on the presidency through 1985, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan put the world on the precipice of a nuclear holocaust. Meanwhile, superhero vigilantism is outlawed with the exception of those who are in the employ of the United States government.

The typical understanding of the series notes that *Watchmen* deconstructs and satirizes the notion of the superhero and does so by orchestrating a history of superheroes through several layers of metatext, but primarily through text excerpts from *Under the Hood*—the fictional biography by Hollis Mason, a former superhero in the *Watchmen* universe. The series also features a number of flashbacks that have historical markers that pair with the ebbs and flows of the production history of superhero comics in the real world. Along with the narrative exploration of psychology and traumas that make up its vigilante superheroes, *Watchmen* invents the psychiatric evaluations of characters, media coverage of the cultural backlash against superheroes, promotional materials for marketing superhero toys, and a number of personal correspondences amongst other pseudo-artifacts. Each element critiques some aspect of the real-world superhero industry and its relationship to liberal capitalism.[4]

In its conception, Moore initially intended for the series to be populated by the Charlton Comics superheroes acquired by DC Comics. But largely because the DC editorial team had other plans for folding these characters into their regular lineup after 1985's event-series, *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Ditko's Blue Beetle, The Question, and Captain Atom were transformed into Nite Owl, Rorschach, and Dr. Manhattan, respectively. And it is through the character of Rorschach that readers have most commonly observed a reflection and critique of the politics presented in Ditko's comics. Before changing the character name and design to Rorschach, Moore wrote in his character notes for Dave Gibbons,

> I suppose what I want to do with the character is to keep him as true as possible to the quintessential Steve Ditko character and philosophy. Now, while I've always found Steve Ditko's expressed political opinions to be strange and possibly dangerous, I have a huge amount of admiration for anybody who is prepared to take an unpopular position simply because they happen to believe it's morally right. … On top of this, I have the greatest possible regard for Steve Ditko as an artist and creator and wouldn't want to portray his characters falsely.[5]

Given this information, it seems that Moore's intent is less an inversion of Ditko's characters and politics, as is now commonplace for other superheroes in works like *Supreme, Superman: Red Son, The Authority*, and others.[6] Rather, Moore is taking Ditko seriously in his interpretation of the characters, reflecting a version of Ditko's politics that is as close as Moore thinks he can approximate for the world of *Watchmen*. As such, there is an inherent critique in this presentation, as evidenced by the dystopian world created by the ideological perspective championed by Ditko and others. Recognizing the pervasive nature of such an ideology, as well as contemporary challenges to it, Moore also writes of The Question/Rorschach that the character is likely understood by readers as "either one incorruptible force at large in a world of eroded morals and values or he is a dangerous and near-psychotic sociopath who kills without compassion or regard for legal niceties."[7] This assumed either/or reaction to the character, in a certain way, reflects Ditko's own set of standards about ethical behavior, but also calls them into question by taking what Ditko sees as moral absolutes and then insisting that, in the real world, they are anything but.

While undoubtedly conscious of the ideological framework Ditko presented with The Question, Mr. A, and in a number of other comics, Moore and Gibbons's choice to make abstract principles literal is an interesting one and remains one of the hallmarks of the series. For Ditko, the principles held up by Mr. A and The Question as they drop criminals off buildings or kick them into improbably deep and dangerous sewers is less about advocating the literal taking of a life to rid a city of its corrupt elements and more about the philosophic, internal struggle *for* life—a life lived on one's own terms. The consequences of moving what Moore categorizes as "possibly dangerous" from the abstract to the ostensibly concrete is a significant element throughout *Watchmen* signaled not just by the challenges leveled directly at Ditko through the character of Rorschach, but by the first wave of superheroes in the comic whose vigilantism was inspired by the Superman comics they read. According to *Watchmen*, in other words, some things may be better left to the imagination. The fantasies and philosophic explorations played out on the comic-book page, therefore, are potential invitations to disaster.

Of course, one might apply Moore and Gibbons's critique across other media as well, and this is the kind of criticism Ditko had responded to in the past. First with the essay, "Violence the Phoney Issue" and later with the short comic "Social Justice," both discussed in chapter five. However, it's not just the ideological interpretation and challenges that are worth noting in *Watchmen*'s dependence on the work of Steve Ditko. The pseudo-history presented in *Watchmen*, too, is dependent on the markers that Ditko laid down. Within the context of the story, superheroes were outlawed in 1977, largely as a result of the actions of Rorschach, whom the public saw as a violent loose cannon who openly and brutally murdered criminals.

Beyond linking the violent acts perpetrated by Rorschach to those of Ditko's Question and Mr. A, the historical and character markers the series laid out are loaded with reference. In a vaguer sense, the transition away from the more sanitized, Comics Code-approved Question into the more unfiltered Mr. A is highlighted in *Watchmen* as Rorschach becomes increasingly violent, until, in 1975, the character snaps after discovering the mutilated body of a six-year-old girl. The fictional events presented here mirror the horrors inflicted on another little girl in the 1973 Mr. A story "…the Right to Kill." (figures 7.1 and 7.2) Moore and Gibbons use this moment to highlight another key change in Rorschach's behavior that also represents a shift in Ditko's work. This time it comes through the seemingly unusual staccato dialogue given to Rorschach.

Punctuated with ellipses and stripped down to only the most essential words to get his point across, Rorschach rarely speaks in sentences of more than five or six words. This element of his character is also linked to Rorschach's discovery of the kidnapped little girl, but, just as importantly, it reflects the kind of essentialized dialogue found in many, if not the majority of, independent comics produced by Steve Ditko.

As readers of Ditko's work, Moore and Gibbons certainly would have identified this unusual pattern of speech Ditko gave to his heroes and then transferred it over to Rorschach as a gesture towards Ditko and the changes in his characters from the cleaned-up corporately-produced comics of the 1960s to his grittier underground and independent work of the 1970s and beyond. Moreover, this creative nod towards Steve Ditko is also positioned as a transformative moment in the history of the superhero where the apologetics applied to the violence and ugliness of such characters was pushed aside in favor of something more tangible and brutal, forcing readers—in *Watchmen*, the public—to acknowledge that, as Rorschach might put it, instead of facing the truth, they had "made a face that [they] could bear to look at in the mirror."[8]

Watchmen offers a fairly obvious critique of contemporary liberalism, and that it does this principally by using the comics and characters created by Steve Ditko is significant both for understanding *Watchmen* as well as for plotting out the trajectory of the comics that followed and responded to *Watchmen*. That Moore had initially chosen characters created specifically by Ditko is not inconsequential, because if he had only wanted to re-evaluate the role of the superhero in the American consciousness, he could have selected any number of other properties DC had acquired, or he could have done as Mark Gruenwald and company had with *The Squadron Supreme* years earlier at Marvel, by creating analogs for some of the most well-known DC Comics heroes. Or, he simply could have created entirely new characters that essentialized the issues he wanted to address. Moore and Gibbons were forced to merge these latter two options when DC wouldn't let them have the Charlton characters. That Moore and Gibbons took on Ditko specifically means that their interpretation and the trials they put his *ideas* through puts their imitators, albeit obliquely, in conversation with Ditko, too.

By placing much of the post-*Watchmen* output of the 1980s and 1990s in relationship to the work of Steve Ditko, it's worth noting that the criticism presented by *Watchmen* should not be misunderstood as being necessarily harshly adversarial towards Steve Ditko's work; rather, it can be understood as conversational and curious. There is no reason to assume that Ditko himself approved of war or interpersonal violence as a means of solving the world's problems,[9] and he undoubtedly would not have approved of the anti-heroes that populated *Watchmen* (which is not to say that Moore, Gibbons, and Higgins did). Further, Moore's presumption that the imaginary violent acts of Ditko's character should be construed as a call for literal violence is a fundamental misunderstanding of the philosophic mechanics of Ditko's work. This is not to demean the artistic achievement and historical significance of *Watchmen*, but it does shed light on the misperceptions many fans and readers held about Ditko's work at the time—even still today. And although the concern and critique are obvious, they, too, should not be misunderstood as contemptuous on the part of Moore and Gibbons. In numerous interviews, both Moore and Gibbons have expressed a sincere reverence for Ditko, his work, and the innovations he brought to comics.[10] Instead, the challenge of *Watchmen* is more about a broadly accepted ideological and philosophical framework of which Ditko's comics and characters were representative.

Although most readings of Ditko—this study included—focus on the work he did at Marvel, Ditko was producing new comics all the way up to his death in the summer of 2018, with several posthumous works released and in production. Many of these comics and essays directly address Ditko's recollection of comics history and his time at Marvel, including his reasons for abruptly leaving the company in 1966, as well as essays on creator rights, the creation of Spider-Man and Dr. Strange, violence in the media, and a number of essays and comics about his view of the comics press and fandom. Although he did not and would not have used the specific term "toxic" to describe many comic book fans (CBFs, to Ditko), toxic is precisely how he presented them and perhaps not unjustifiably so.

In spite of what he saw as misunderstandings and misrepresentations of his work, Ditko didn't see it as his obligation to make recommendations "for other minds, interests"[11] or even to provide ostensibly definitive readings of his own work. Rather, like the ancient masters that informed Blavatsky and those that followed her, or like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Ditko's work seems bent on disrupting mores and providing emblematic narratives of self-cultivation and redemption. It was up to the reader to make those connections on their own and to apply those ideas as they saw fit. While the effort to present readers with a distinct, complex ideological perspective is clear, Ditko held that readers should not obey his commands or share his sense of ideological purity. A commitment to earnestly held principles seems to have outweighed a difference in philosophic ideals for Ditko, as evidenced by his maintaining warm and long friendships with those, like fellow comics artist and sometime collaborator Wallace Wood, whose political outlook was diametrically opposed to Ditko's own.

STILL CONJURING FANTASEES

Amongst a number of new characters developed by Ditko during the last twenty-eight years of his life were mysterious hero characters, like The Cape, who provide a distinct sense of cosmic intraspace and what happens when individuals are forced to confront the contents of their own conscious and subconscious minds. In a 2015 story appearing in *The 32-Page Series*,[12] The Cape—a sentient, bodiless cape that looks similar to the one worn by Dr. Strange—encounters a member of a group of nameless crooks. The story contains no description of the crooks or the nature of their crimes, but Ditko's art and narrative style makes the characters' criminality plain. After the crooks go their separate ways, The Cape descends upon one of them, opening itself wide to reveal a blackened inner lining and then enveloping the crook. The crook is sucked into a disorienting and confused intraspace, where he is faced with his own sense of greed, what Ditko would consider the unearned, and after chasing after a giant pile of money, the crook is brutalized by two ethereal figures that represent the crook's partners. (figure 7.3) Exiting the cape, paranoid that his partners are about to do him in, the crook shambles down the street where he is immediately bludgeoned from behind and he bleeds out on the street. A witness who sees the crime notifies the police, who arrest the murderer, who is revealed as one of the crook's partners. It's also revealed that the arrested hood had also murdered the third partner.

The story has a limited amount of dialogue, and Ditko conveys much of the narrative visually, perfectly in line with the aesthetic he had cultivated over the previous decades. Also in line with the work he had produced since the 1950s is the sense of dark karma and cosmic intraspace that populates the story. The crook is pulled into the cosmic intraspace held within The Cape, a being that consciously seeks ne'er-do-wells, where he faces his own ethical failings, and both the crook and his cronies face the dark karmic punishments for whatever crimes they had committed. In the ten short pages of the story, Ditko provides a distinct sense of how dark karma and cosmic intraspace work in tandem with one another. This pairing exemplifies how the Law of Attraction invites and begets violent ends for those who would impose themselves on the rights and property of others and how a presumably rational justice system is invoked as a retaliatory force against evil. The desire for the unearned—an internal disposition—led the criminals to their crimes; their crimes, then, operate as a physical manifestation of a diseased mind; the deaths and arrests of the criminals are the cosmic corrective. Unsurprisingly, these kinds of mystic and cosmological correctives appear throughout Ditko's late-period stories, and so do more direct references to the occult as a means of accessing these intangible forces.

In a 2018 issue of *The 32-Page Series*, Ditko enlists an occult apparatus for a vignette called "A Fantasee." In the first panel of this story, a crystal ball sits under a dangling overhead light on a small round table, with the crystal ball recessed in a small room with a doorway framed by drawn curtains. Although there is no narration or signage to explicitly say so, the scene has all the trappings of the dens inhabited by psychic mediums and fortune tellers found in popular culture. Over the next seven panels on the nine-panel page, a mysterious creature emerges from the crystal ball, first appearing as an enormous eye (giving the story its name) and then as a pained face that is pushing its way out of the confines of the orb containing it. Once the phantasmagoric creature emerges, it rushes out the door to a scene where a man is holding a woman at gunpoint and then shoots her dead. Immediately after the shot is fired, the phantasm enters the scene and the man begins firing his gun, to no effect. The phantasm envelops and disarms the man, apparently killing him and leaving the man's corpse on the floor, atrophied with fear. The phantasm then returns to the crystal ball, ending the story. All of this occurs over two pages and eighteen panels. (figure 7.4)

The remarkable economy of Ditko's story is evident in the action on the page and the way the story distills the themes that drove Ditko's output since 1953. The story features occult, mystic elements as a source knowledge that informs a rational sense of justice, the dark karmic force of retaliatory violence, and the cosmic intraspace—this time the interior of a crystal ball that houses it all. Of further significance, the story is almost entirely wordless, except for a single panel where the man threatens the woman, shouting, "No one says 'no' to me!"[13] Embedded within this single phrase from a single panel is another constant from Ditko's work: the evil of imposition of the second-hander, believing one is owed dominance over another.

It's not just the initiation of violence that must be dealt with by the mysterious phantasm, but the anti-mind, anti-life premises that invited the violence to begin with. Moreover, the comic's dependence on the page layout and the contents of the panels to drive the narrative and deliver its symbolism again emphasizes the primacy of reading the visuals in any analysis of Ditko's work. While this story was far from the last new work that Ditko would publish with Robin Snyder, it's a fitting, aphoristic coda for all that he had achieved up to this point and a marker of the consistency of his philosophy across nearly seven decades of work.

MYSTERIOUS STRANGERS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Even though Ditko publicly refused to be the mouthpiece for any worldview, his philosophy and political ideology seem to coincide with a trend in twentieth-century liberal thought that merged the mind-power mysticism of New Thought with the rise of neoliberalism and the libertarian movement. Although the aim of this study is not to make Ditko the spokesman for mystic liberalism, Ditko's work dependably reflects a distinct set of political and ideological precepts found not just in the popular texts by Nathaniel Branden, Ayn Rand, or Norman Vincent Peale but in the words and actions of Ronald Reagan and other contemporary neoliberal politicians.

Recognizing Ditko's work as being in line with mystic liberalism is less intended to brand Ditko with such a label than it is to present Ditko's work as a clear lens for identifying mystic liberalism in popular and political discourse. The coherence that Ditko brings to seemingly incongruous ideas enables a broad application of his philosophy to a range of texts, phenomena, and political actions. Without the advantage of having Ditko specifically name his approach, mystic liberalism, as explicated in this study, and its observability outside of Ditko's oeuvre, is appropriate for making plain a complex worldview that is not easily placed within a pre-existing category.

But it isn't lexical expedience alone that makes mystic liberalism a useful framework. In an April 2010 guest column for the *Washington Post*'s "Political Bookworm," Mitch Horowitz does a bit of occult forensic work identifying the source of a peculiar speech delivered by Ronald Reagan in 1957 at Eureka College that was then carted out again for a piece Reagan penned for *Parade Magazine* in 1981 called "What the Fourth of July Means to Me." In Reagan's essay, he tells readers "a legend about the day of our nation's birth" where a mysterious stranger rose and spoke to the squabbling Founders as they debated the contents of the Declaration of Independence. The stranger's impassioned plea that they answer the call of destiny and sign that immortal document at once confounded and convinced the delegates of the constitutional convention to, as Reagan put it, rush forward and sign the Declaration "to be as immortal as a work of man can be." After the frenzy to sign the Declaration, the delegates turned to see that the mysterious stranger had disappeared from the room, in spite of the locked and guarded doors.[14] On its own, Reagan's story might come across as the kind of nationalist boosterism expected on the Fourth of July, but Horowitz provides a revised context that places Reagan, and his story, within the mystic liberal frame.

What Horowitz recognized in the story was "the unmistakable mark of a little-known but widely influential scholar of occult philosophy, Manly P. Hall."[15] Hall had written a number of texts and lectured on the occult throughout the middle years of the twentieth century, but it was 1944's *The Secret Destiny of America* that seems to have grabbed Reagan's attention, as it was there amongst evidence for America's place in the "Great Plan" where the story of the mysterious stranger appeared. Reagan never publicly named his source, either in 1957 or 1981, but the similarity between Reagan's language and Hall's is clear, and Horowitz makes a compelling case. Horowitz cites, in comparison to Reagan's version of the legend, Hall's *Secret Destiny*: "When they turned to thank him for his timely oratory, he was not to be found, nor could any be found who knew who he was or how had come in or gone out through the locked and guarded doors."[16] Although it had been in circulation for some time, it's not clear whether Hall was familiar with the earliest known version of the story as it appeared in George Leppard's *Washington and His Generals*, a collection of legends about the events of 1776 published in 1847, but, as Horowitz notes, the story seems to have been delivered to Hall by a secretary of the Theosophical Society,[17] re-packing the mystic baggage for the story.

What's significant for the purposes of this study is not just that Ronald Reagan cribbed a story from an occult author, but that both Hall and Reagan entangle mid-twentieth-century liberal politics with the occult, and Ronald Reagan, specifically, made entanglements accessible to a mass audience, encouraging them to link their political worldview and affection for their country's ideals with what Hall pondered was "one of the agents of the Secret Order."[18] While the comic books and essays of Steve Ditko provide a clear and reliable insight into mystic liberalism, the result of this confluence of ideas presented by Hall and Reagan is a demonstration of the practical operations of mystic liberalism in American political discourse. It's all well and good to take a revised view of Steve Ditko's work and apply it to the ongoing conversations in comics studies, particularly those discussions about major contributions to the medium, like *Watchmen*.

However, because Ditko's work provides insight into a peculiar phenomenon in twentieth-century American politics, we can use the ideology presented in his comics as a means for at once understanding that phenomenon, demonstrating its availability to audiences through popular media, and extrapolating from there how it manifested across different media platforms over time. Even within the microcosm of the Reagan example above, the language and practices of mystic liberalism identified here can then be used to complicate and revise the historical and cultural interpretation of a broad spectrum of practical political activity.

FACING UP TO THE UNKNOWN

This book has sought to revise popular perception of the work of Steve Ditko as well as reposition the role of comics studies in cultural and academic conversations. As grandiose as the latter may seem to some readers, identifying a significant strand of unusual political thought as it appeared in American comic books demonstrates that comics studies should be doing more than reporting back recent discoveries or performing historical recontextualization of exclusive interest to the field's constituents or comics fans. Rather, comics studies should be playing detective in the ongoing investigations conducted by the humanities, offering new insights procured from the comics that have spawned global multimedia empires.

Indeed, an increasing number of studies are attempting just such a feat, and many of those studies have been cited throughout this book. Recent works like Qiana Whitted's *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest*, Deborah Elizabeth Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*, and Kate Polak's *Ethics in the Gutter: Empathy and Historical Fiction in Comics* make important interventions for the field and employ comics as useful means of exploring significant cultural and intersectional issues. Books like Marc Singer's *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies* provide significant, critical evaluations of the field as it comes into its own as a field that unapologetically engages in critical discourse with all due rigor and enthusiasm. But in order to keep the momentum going, comics studies itself must continue to identify those key contributors and contributions that helped produce potent political and theoretical insights. As the creator and co-creator of some of the most widely recognized cultural icons in the world, Steve Ditko is one of those productive minds that demands attention and scrutiny.

In the closing moments of *Static*, Fera surprises Stac and Dr. Serch proclaiming that, like Stac, she is going to strike out on her own to find new quests and means of knowing herself. Realizing that she was not acting in accord with her own previously-held beliefs, Fera says that she has awoken from her self-imposed slumber and that she is "beginning to see the naked, unpleasant truth about [herself]," and that she'll be leaving "to do some studying, experiencing—learning to face up to the unknown." After all, what does she "really have to fear from life?"[19] In spite of the creeping terrors and horrors of cosmic intraspace that populated so much of Ditko's output, the final say that Ditko offers is not to fear those internal terrors but to acknowledge them, embrace them, and replace them with a life-affirming willingness to charge headlong into the unknown, to be the Nietzschean child.

The restless excavation of the interior in search of the self, and the ethereal battles of mind and anti-mind, life and anti-life presented through the tension of stark blacks against the white of the blank page often set Ditko at odds with his readers, but in between, anchoring those tensions was this: we become what we think and believe about ourselves. What Ditko, and all of his mysterious travelers, seemed to think most about was the search for a better version.

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[1] Steve Ditko, "Violence: The Phoney Issue," *Guts* no. 5 (1969): 23. It's worth noting that in the opening of this essay where the cited quote appears, Ditko also writes: "While accepting Objectivism as my philosophical base: I am not a spokesman for Objectivism and I alone am responsible for the views expressed here!" This text is the closest Ditko ever came to saying that he was an Objectivist, and, even setting aside the hedging he does here, it is worth noting this phrasing was removed in later reproductions of this essay, beginning in *The Ditko Collection* volume 1 in 1985. That Ditko specifically removed any verbiage, even if accidentally or inappropriately, that would tie him to being a strict adherent of Objectivism.

[2] Quoted in Murray Boltinoff, "Meet the Men Behind the Creeper," editorial, *Showcase,* no. 73, March/April 1968, 25.

[3] In the spring of 2018, Robin Snyder and Steve Ditko shared their version of events regarding Ditko's proposal for a new Blue Beetle series. According to the recollections of Snyder and Ditko, the proposal was turned in, but the work was never paid for and neither Snyder nor Ditko ever heard from then-DC editor Dick Giordano, whom both had worked with previously. After confronting Giordano about the lack of payment, Giordano "grudgingly delivered up a check and in handing it over, threatened that Snyder was no longer welcome at DC." No reason was given, in this accounting, for Snyder's expulsion, and nothing ever came of the proposal. Along with the history, Snyder and Ditko reproduced the original proposal, some visual mock-ups of the characters' personal entanglements, and some character sketches. Briefly, the plot picked up with a young Ted Kord, "a dedicated young research scientist who, fresh from college, made an error of judgement in working for his uncle Jarvis, the consequences of which set in motion a monstrous juggernaut of evil." Kord has to reconcile with his complicity and stop the Jarvis Nation. "Not from guilt but a cold appraisal that he is responsible for these events." The familiar themes of rational self-reflection and reconciliation appear to run throughout this story as they did through nearly all of Ditko's work. See: Robin Snyder, "The Legend of The Blue Beetle," *The Hero Comics,* no. 26, Spring 2018, 2-13.

[4] The irony of the endless perpetuation of *Watchmen* through multimedia licenses, toys, toasters, and other tchotchkes is likely not lost on Moore and Gibbons. For further reading on the politics of both *Watchmen*'s content as well as its status as a cultural artifact and keystone for issues regarding issues

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surround intellectual property, the reader is referred to Andrew Hoeberek's 2014 study, *Considering Watchmen: Poetics, Property, Politics*.

[5] Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, and John Higgins, *Watchmen*, Absolute Ed. (New York: DC Comics, 2005), 431.

[6] *Supreme*, as conceived by creator Rob Liefeld, imagines an egotistical and ultraviolent Superman archetype, and was later revamped by Alan Moore to operate as a tribute to the Silver Age Superman, in a manner not dissimilar to Moore's classic Superman story, *Whatever Happened to the Man from Tomorrow? Supreme* is an interesting case at least because it first represents an inversion of the Superman archetype, which is inverted again to act as a kind of tribute to the character and the sincerity the initial version of the character rejected. *Superman: Red Son* imagines a world where Superman was raised in the Soviet Union, and *The Authority* is a series that introduced analogs for Superman and Batman (Apollo and Midnighter) who engage in lethal force and are a romantic couple.

[7] Moore, Gibbons, and Higgins, *Watchmen,* Absolute Ed., 431.

[8] Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, and John Higgins, "The Abyss Gazes Also," *Watchmen* no. 6, (1987): 10.

[9] In an April 2017 letter to fan Erich Mees, posted to a Facebook group dedicated to Ditko's letters, Ditko writes, "We have people, globally willing to throw away their lives on all kinds of causes, wars. Comic book companies, buyers, readers continue to support ANTI-heroes (anti-mind and life)." The connection Ditko draws between real-world violence and what he sees as the perpetuation of anti-heroes is clear. It's not that the media responsible for producing anti-heroes is to blame; rather, it is the underlying anti-mind and anti-life worldview that makes both war and anti-heroes at once possible and popular. What's necessary is a shift in individual minds and how they see themselves as a part of the world. Ditko closes the letter saying, "One just has to try to do the best one can with no guarantees." See: Steve Ditko, Facebook: Steve Ditko Letters update, August 15, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10215989307501263&set=pcb.317124379040578&type=3&theater&ifg=1.

[10] Although there are a number of *ex post facto* incidents of this, perhaps the most salient example is the paratext included with reprint editions of *Watchmen*, like the one cited in endnote 5.

[11] Steve Ditko to Zack Kruse, March 13, 2018.

[12] Steve Ditko, "The Cape," *The 32-Page Series: #2oww3oww* no. 23, (2015): 9-19.

[13] Steve Ditko, "A Fantasee," *The 32-Page Series* no. 26, (2018): 11

[14] Ronald Reagan, "Message on the Observance of Independence Day, 1981," July 3, 1981, accessed January 24, 2019, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/70381a.

[15] Mitch Horowitz, "Reagan and the Occult," Political Bookworm, *The Washington Post*, 10 April 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/political-bookworm/2010/04/reagan_and_the_occult.html

[16] Horowitz, "Reagan and the Occult"; Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Destiny of America* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008), 118-123.

[17] Horowitz, "Reagan and the Occult."

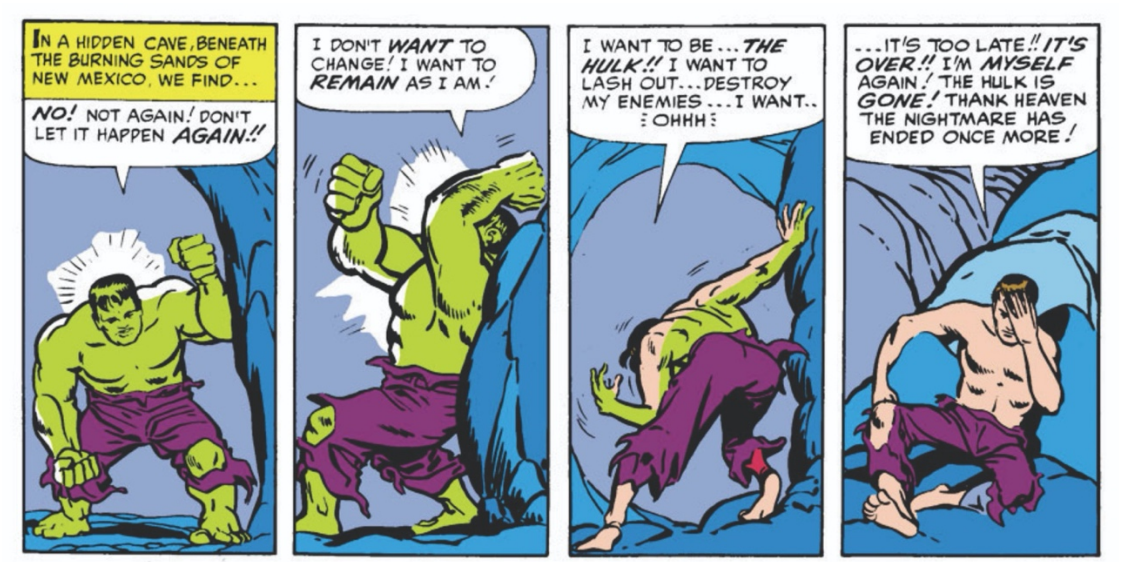
[18] Hall, *The Secret*, 122.

[19] "Dangerous Moves," *Steve Ditko's Static*, (Bellingham, Robin Snyder and Steve Ditko, 2000): 146-147.

APPENDIX

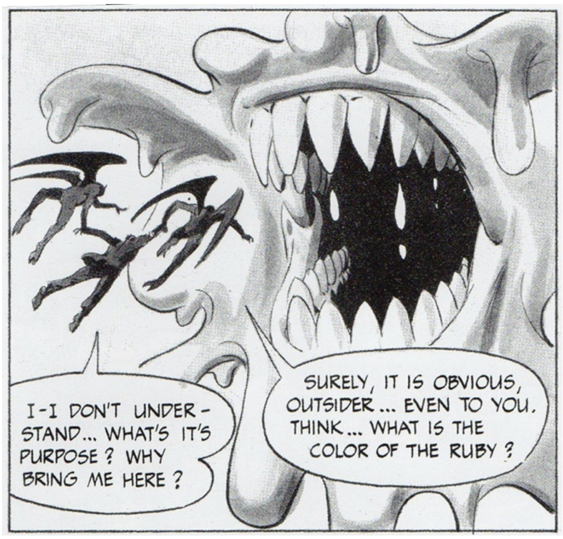
FIGURES

Figure 1.1


IN A HIDDEN CAVE, BENEATH THE BURNING SANDS OF NEW MEXICO, WE FIND...
NO! NOT AGAIN! DON'T LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN!!
I DON'T WANT TO CHANGE! I WANT TO REMAIN AS I AM!
I WANT TO BE... THE HULK!! I WANT TO LASH OUT...DESTROY MY ENEMIES...I WANT.. :OHHH:
...IT'S TOO LATE!! IT'S OVER!! I'M MYSELF AGAIN! THE HULK IS GONE! THANK HEAVEN THE NIGHTMARE HAS ENDED ONCE MORE!

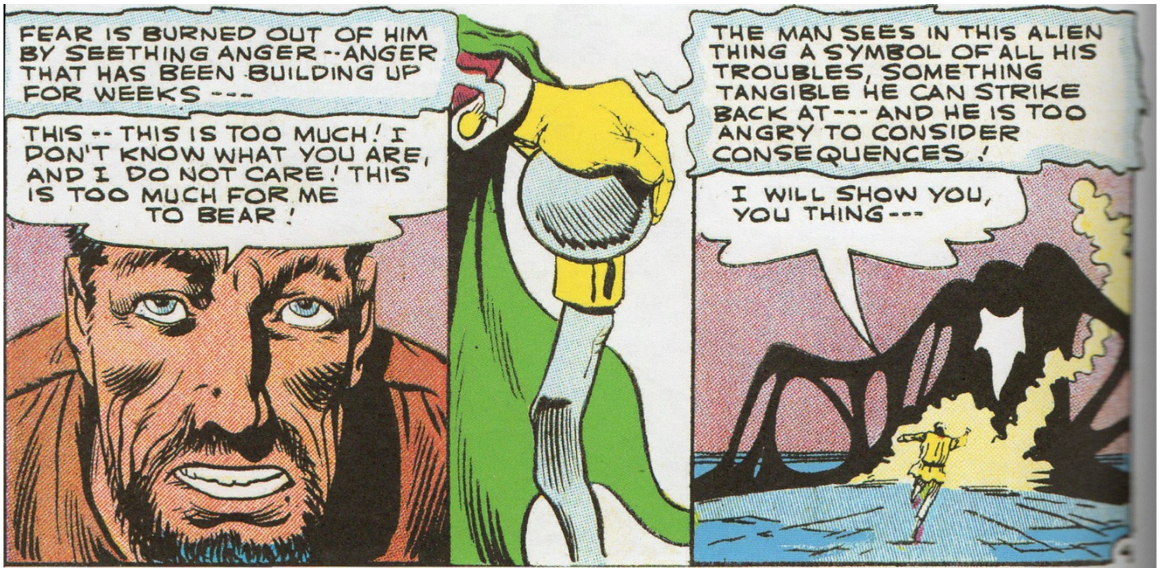
The Hulk faces an internal struggle as he fights to remain in his brutish form against the more rational mind of Bruce Banner. Dialogue edited by Stan Lee; Steve Ditko pencils; George Roussos (as George Bell) inks; Sam Rosen letters. "The Incredible Hulk," *Tales to Astonish* #60 (October 1964). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 1.2


I-I DON'T UNDER-STAND... WHAT'S IT'S PURPOSE? WHY BRING ME HERE?
SURELY, IT IS OBVIOUS, OUTSIDER... EVEN TO YOU. THINK... WHAT IS THE COLOR OF THE RUBY?

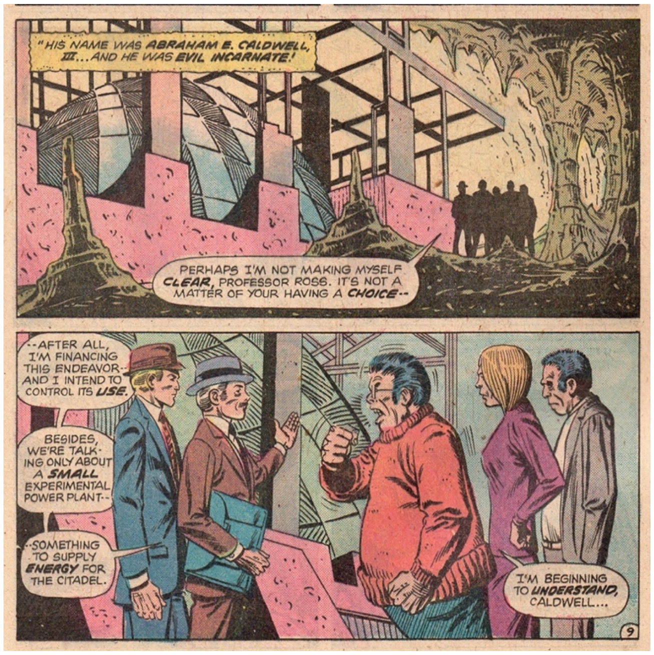
Lester Darrow is escorted into a gaping maw by the inhabitants of the ruby. Written by Archie Goodwin; art by Steve Ditko; letters by Ben Oda. "Deep Ruby!," *Eerie* #6 (November 1966). © New Comic Company.

Figure 1.3


FEAR IS BURNED OUT OF HIM BY SEETHING ANGER--ANGER THAT HAS BEEN BUILDING UP FOR WEEKS---
THIS--THIS IS TOO MUCH! I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE, AND I DO NOT CARE! THIS IS TOO MUCH FOR ME TO BEAR!
THE MAN SEES IN THIS ALIEN THING A SYMBOL OF ALL HIS TROUBLES, SOMETHING TANGIBLE HE CAN STRIKE BACK AT---AND HE IS TOO ANGRY TO CONSIDER CONSEQUENCES!
I WILL SHOW YOU, YOU THING---

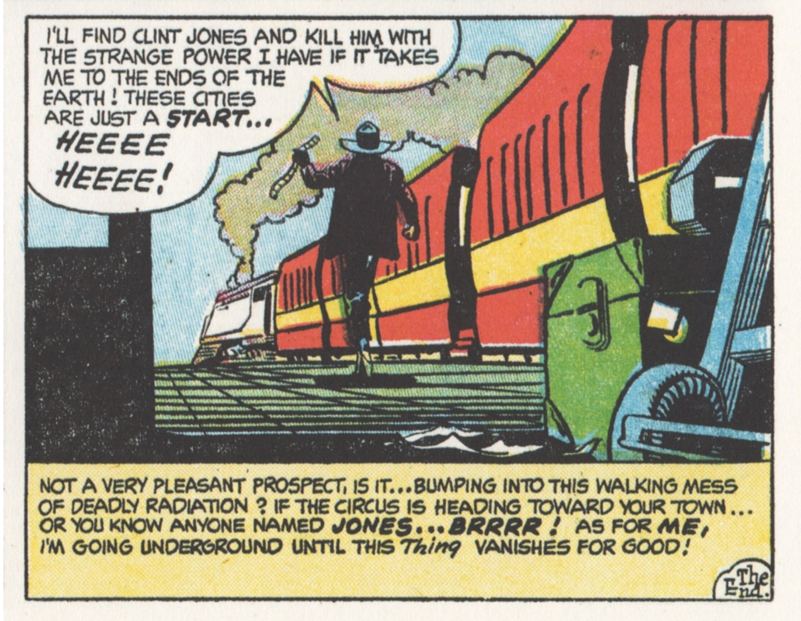
Juan faces the darkened symbol of all his troubles and fears as it emerges from the murky depths of the sea. No confirmed writer credit (but likely Joe Gill); art by Steve Ditko; unknown letterer. "From Out of the Depths," *This Magazine is Haunted* #14 (December 1957).

Figure 1.4


"HIS NAME WAS ABRAHAM E. CALDWELL, III... AND HE WAS EVIL INCARNATE!
PERHAPS I'M NOT MAKING MYSELF CLEAR, PROFESSOR ROSS. IT'S NOT A MATTER OF YOUR HAVING A CHOICE--
--AFTER ALL, I'M FINANCING THIS ENDEAVOR--AND I INTEND TO CONTROL ITS USE.
BESIDES, WE'RE TALKING ONLY ABOUT A SMALL EXPERIMENTAL POWER PLANT--
--SOMETHING TO SUPPLY ENERGY FOR THE CITADEL.
I'M BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND, CALDWELL...
9

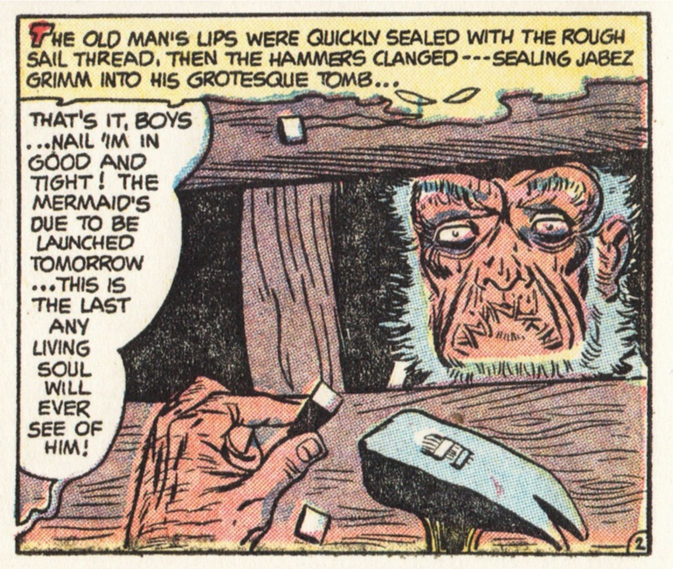
Ditko's art contravenes Conway's script, reinforcing Ditko's own worldview instead of capitulating to the politics of the dialog provided. Written by Gerry Conway, penciled by Steve Ditko; inked by Al Milgrom; letters by John Duffy. "Dooms Day – Minus One," *The Destructor* #4 (August 1975). © SP Media Group.

Figure 3.1


I'LL FIND CLINT JONES AND KILL HIM WITH THE STRANGE POWER I HAVE IF IT TAKES ME TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH! THESE CITIES ARE JUST A START... HEEEE HEEEE!
NOT A VERY PLEASANT PROSPECT, IS IT...BUMPING INTO THIS WALKING MESS OF DEADLY RADIATION? IF THE CIRCUS IS HEADING TOWARD YOUR TOWN... OR YOU KNOW ANYONE NAMED JONES...BRRRR! AS FOR ME, I'M GOING UNDERGROUND UNTIL THIS Thing VANISHES FOR GOOD!
The End.

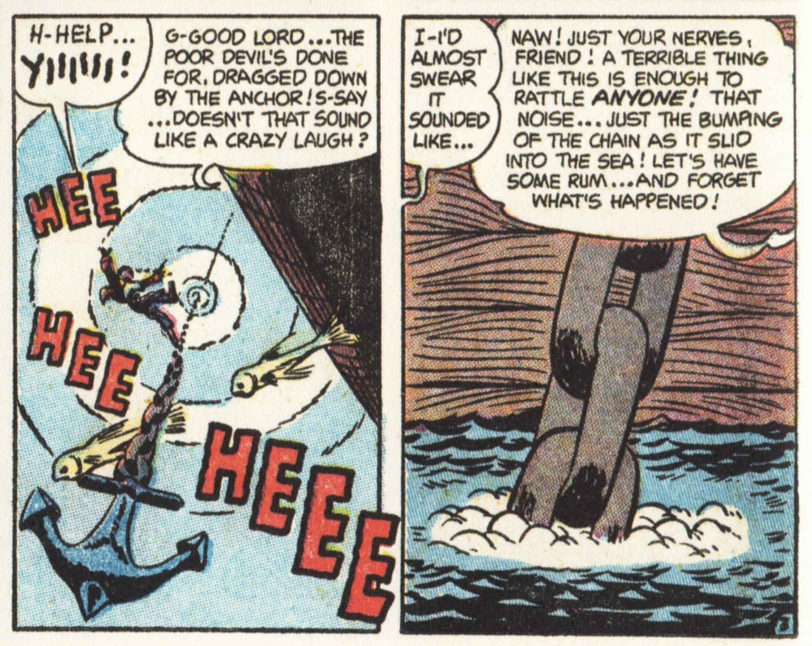
The consequence of the evils of nuclear war and a crooked justice system begins a tour of major American cities to inflict upon them the horrors of an unjust state. Written by Carl Memling; art by Steve Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Doom in the Air," *The Thing* #14 (June 1954).

Figure 3.2


THE OLD MAN'S LIPS WERE QUICKLY SEALED WITH THE ROUGH SAIL THREAD. THEN THE HAMMERS CLANGED---SEALING JABEZ GRIMM INTO HIS GROTESQUE TOMB...
THAT'S IT, BOYS ...NAIL 'IM IN GOOD AND TIGHT! THE MERMAID'S DUE TO BE LAUNCHED TOMORROW ...THIS IS THE LAST ANY LIVING SOUL WILL EVER SEE OF HIM!
2

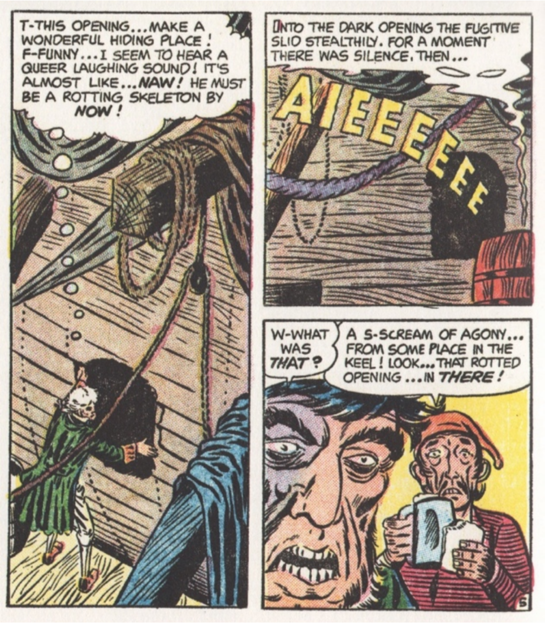
With his lips stitched together, the tortured Jabez Grimm is sealed inside the ship that will be his tomb. Written by Carl Memling; art by Steve Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Day of Reckoning," *The Thing* #15 (July-August 1954).

Figure 3.3


H-HELP... YIIIIII!
G-GOOD LORD...THE POOR DEVIL'S DONE FOR, DRAGGED DOWN BY THE ANCHOR! S-SAY ...DOESN'T THAT SOUND LIKE A CRAZY LAUGH?
HEE HEE HEEEE
I-I'D ALMOST SWEAR IT SOUNDED LIKE...
NAW! JUST YOUR NERVES, FRIEND! A TERRIBLE THING LIKE THIS IS ENOUGH TO RATTLE ANYONE! THAT NOISE... JUST THE BUMPING OF THE CHAIN AS IT SLID INTO THE SEA! LET'S HAVE SOME RUM...AND FORGET WHAT'S HAPPENED!

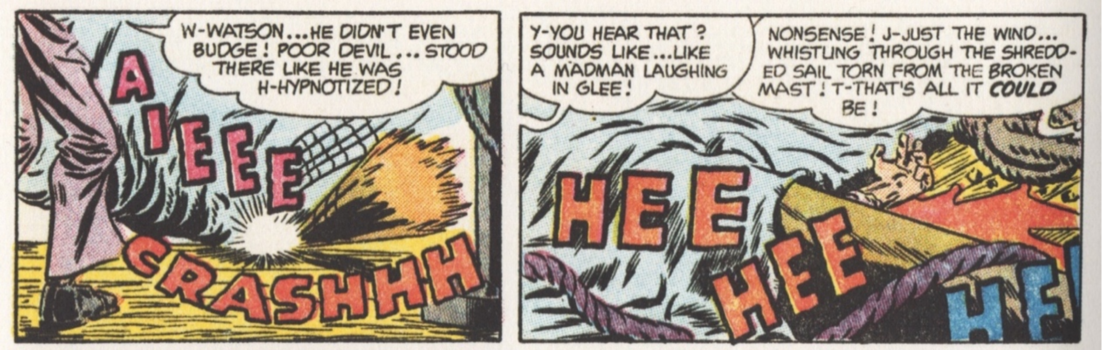
One of Jabez Grimm's murderers is yanked into the sea. Written by Carl Memling; art by Steve Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Day of Reckoning," *The Thing* #15 (July-August 1954).

Figure 3.4


T-THIS OPENING...MAKE A WONDERFUL HIDING PLACE! F-FUNNY...I SEEM TO HEAR A QUEER LAUGHING SOUND! IT'S ALMOST LIKE...NAW! HE MUST BE A ROTTING SKELETON BY NOW!
INTO THE DARK OPENING THE FUGITIVE SLID STEALTHILY. FOR A MOMENT THERE WAS SILENCE. THEN...
AIEEEEEEE
W-WHAT WAS THAT?
A S-SCREAM OF AGONY... FROM SOME PLACE IN THE KEEL! LOOK...THAT ROTTED OPENING...IN THERE!

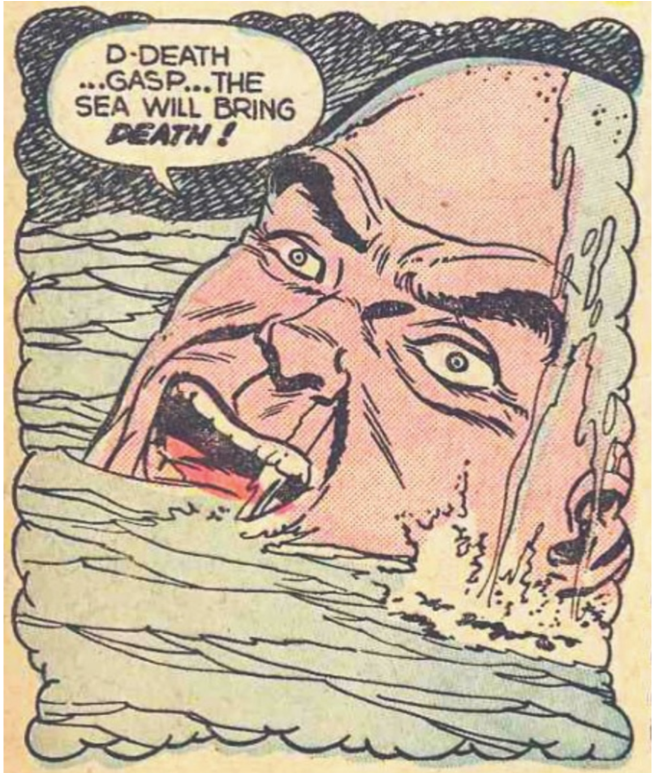
Another of Jabez Grimm's murderers is lured into a darkened space where he meets a mysterious but horrible end. Written by Carl Memling; art by Steve Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Day of Reckoning," *The Thing* #15 (July-August 1954).

Figure 3.5


W-WATSON...HE DIDN'T EVEN BUDGE! POOR DEVIL... STOOD THERE LIKE HE WAS H-HYPNOTIZED!
AIEEE
CRASHHH
Y-YOU HEAR THAT? SOUNDS LIKE...LIKE A MADMAN LAUGHING IN GLEE!
NONSENSE! J-JUST THE WIND... WHISTLING THROUGH THE SHREDDED SAIL TORN FROM THE BROKEN MAST! T-THAT'S ALL IT COULD BE!
HEE
HEE
HE

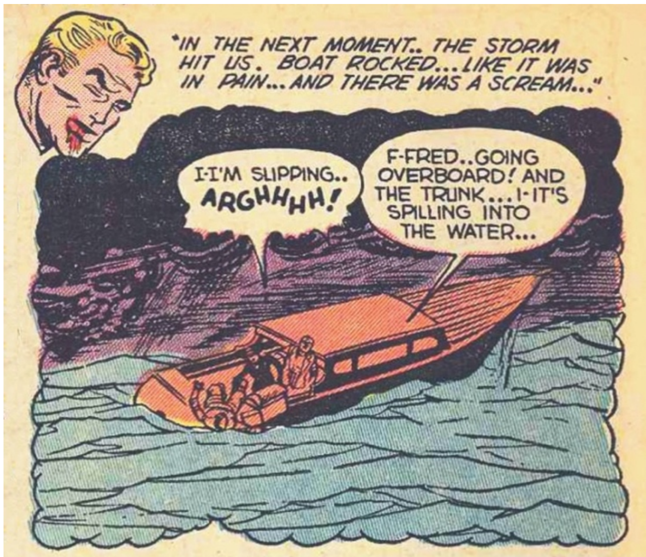
Frozen by terror and the shadow of the falling mast, the mast and sail consume yet another of Jabez Grimm's. Written by Carl Memling; art by Steve Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Day of Reckoning," *The Thing* #15 (July-August 1954).

Figure 3.6


D-DEATH ...GASP...THE SEA WILL BRING DEATH!

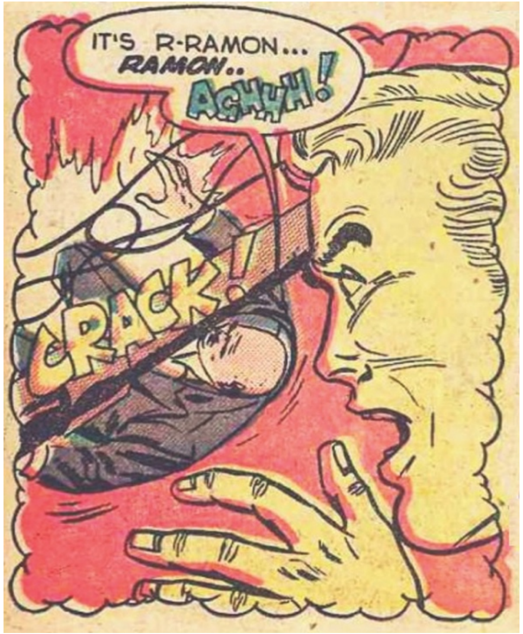
Similar to the circumstances of the later story, "Day of Reckoning," Memling writes in a revenge drowning for artist John Belfi. Written by Carl Memling, art by John Belfi. "A Grave Situation," *The Thing* #8 (April 1953).

Figure 3.7


"IN THE NEXT MOMENT.. THE STORM HIT US. BOAT ROCKED...LIKE IT WAS IN PAIN...AND THERE WAS A SCREAM..."
I-I'M SLIPPING.. ARGHHHH!
F-FRED..GOING OVERBOARD! AND THE TRUNK...I-IT'S SPILLING INTO THE WATER...

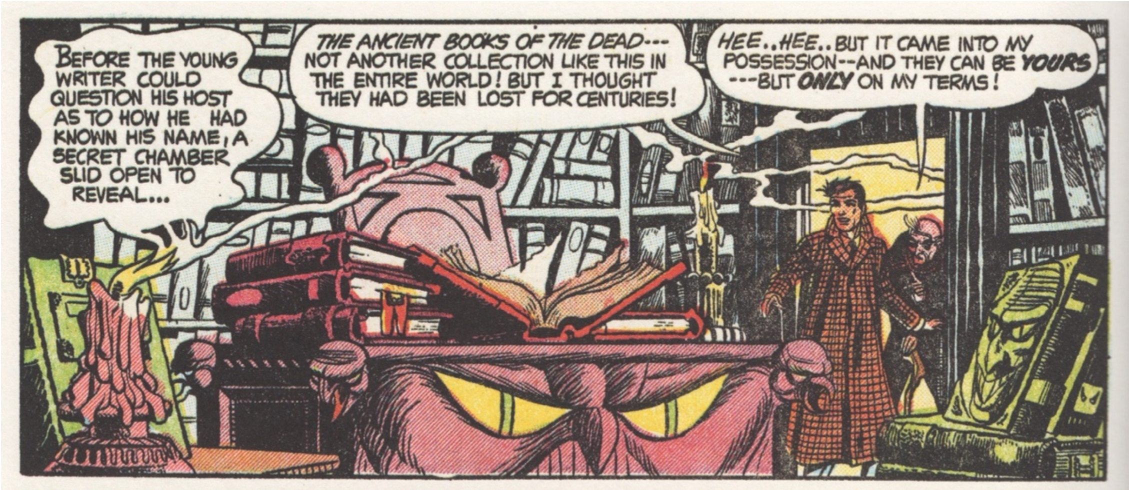
Unlike Ditko's drowning in "Day of Reckoning," Belfi's art emphasizes the plot-device element of the drowning, in contrast to of Ditko's consumptive waters. Written by Carl Memling; art by John Belfi. "A Grave Situation," *The Thing* #8 (April 1953).

Figure 3.8


IT'S R-RAMON... RAMON.. AGHHH!
CRACK!

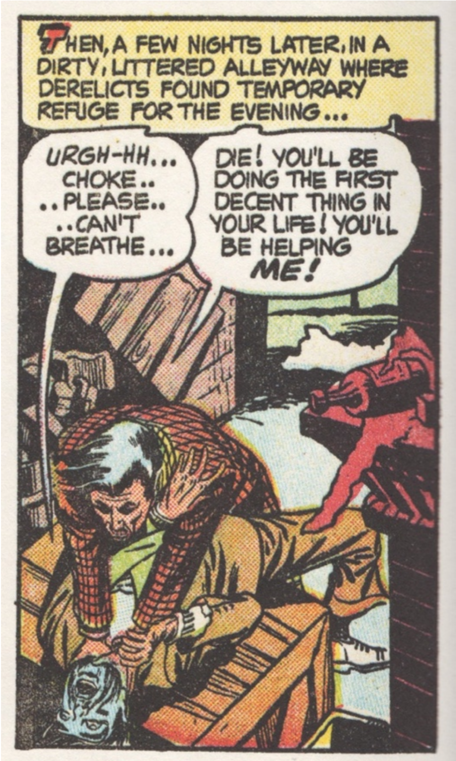
Although both Belfi's and Ditko's victims are paralyzed with fear from the falling mast, Belfi's, like the drowning, Belfi's character is the victim of a mysterious accident whereas Ditko's is swallowed by some dark karmic agent. "Day of Reckoning," Memling writes in a revenge drowning for artist John Belfi. Written by Carl Memling; art by John Belfi. "A Grave Situation," *The Thing* #8 (April 1953).

Figure 3.9


BEFORE THE YOUNG WRITER COULD QUESTION HIS HOST AS TO HOW HE HAD KNOWN HIS NAME, A SECRET CHAMBER SLID OPEN TO REVEAL...
THE ANCIENT BOOKS OF THE DEAD--- NOT ANOTHER COLLECTION LIKE THIS IN THE ENTIRE WORLD! BUT I THOUGHT THEY HAD BEEN LOST FOR CENTURIES!
HEE..HEE.. BUT IT CAME INTO MY POSSESSION--AND THEY CAN BE YOURS ---BUT ONLY ON MY TERMS!

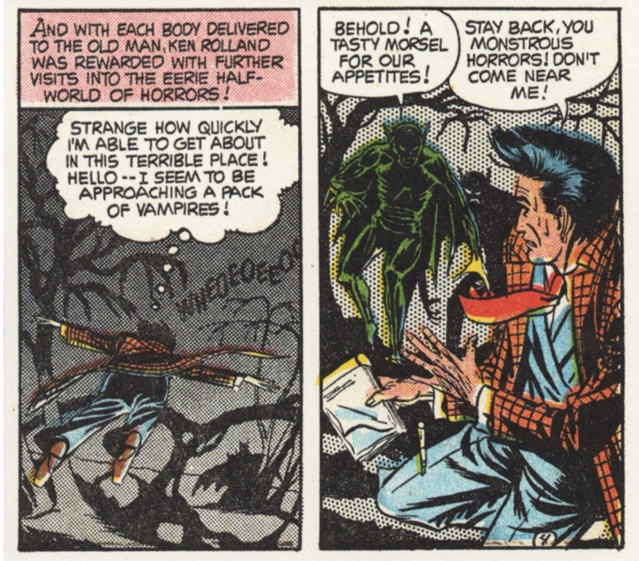
Ken Rolland enters into a cluttered library in an early example of the kind of claustrophobic settings that would become a hallmark of Ditko's work. Art by Steve Ditko; the writer is currently unknown, if not Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Library of Horror," *The Thing* #13 (April 1954).

Figure 3.10


THEN, A FEW NIGHTS LATER, IN A DIRTY, LITTERED ALLEYWAY WHERE DERELICTS FOUND TEMPORARY REFUGE FOR THE EVENING...
URGH-HH... CHOKE.. ..PLEASE.. ..CAN'T BREATHE...
DIE! YOU'LL BE DOING THE FIRST DECENT THING IN YOUR LIFE! YOU'LL BE HELPING ME!

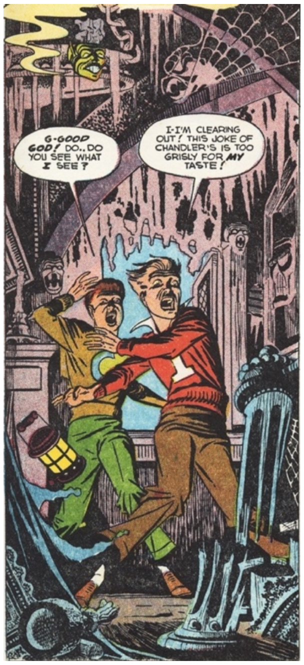
Ken Rolland chokes the life out of a derelict in a dingy narrow alleyway. Art by Steve Ditko; the writer is currently unknown, if not Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Library of Horror," *The Thing* #13 (April 1954).

Figure 3.11


AND WITH EACH BODY DELIVERED TO THE OLD MAN, KEN ROLLAND WAS REWARDED WITH FURTHER VISITS INTO THE EERIE HALF-WORLD OF HORRORS!
STRANGE HOW QUICKLY I'M ABLE TO GET ABOUT IN THIS TERRIBLE PLACE! HELLO--I SEEM TO BE APPROACHING A PACK OF VAMPIRES!
WHEEEEEE
BEHOLD! A TASTY MORSEL FOR OUR APPETITES!
STAY BACK, YOU MONSTROUS HORRORS! DON'T COME NEAR ME!

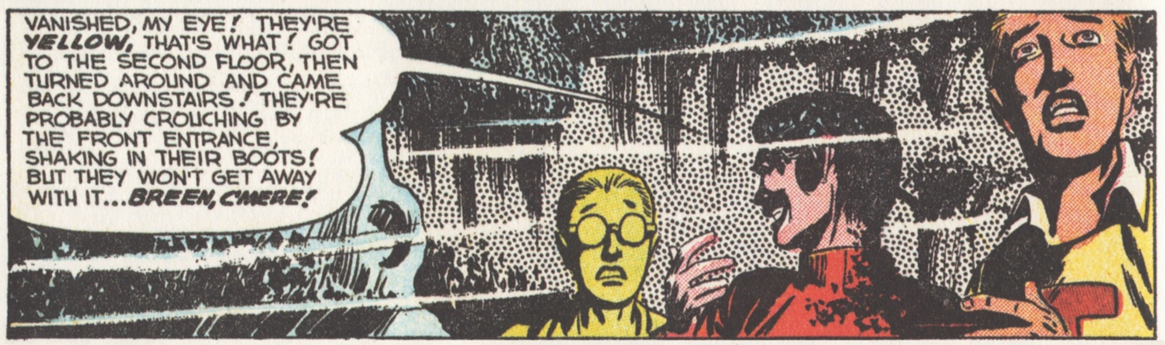
Rolland plummets inward into the cosmic, demonic space hidden inside of the book. Tangled, tentacled internal landscapes like this one would appear throughout Ditko's later work, in a variety of genres. Art by Steve Ditko; the writer is currently unknown, if not Ditko; letters by Charlotte Jetty. "Library of Horror," *The Thing* #13 (April 1954).

Figure 3.12


G-GOOD GOD! DO..DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?
I-I'M CLEARING OUT! THIS JOKE OF CHANDLER'S IS TOO GRISLY FOR MY TASTE!

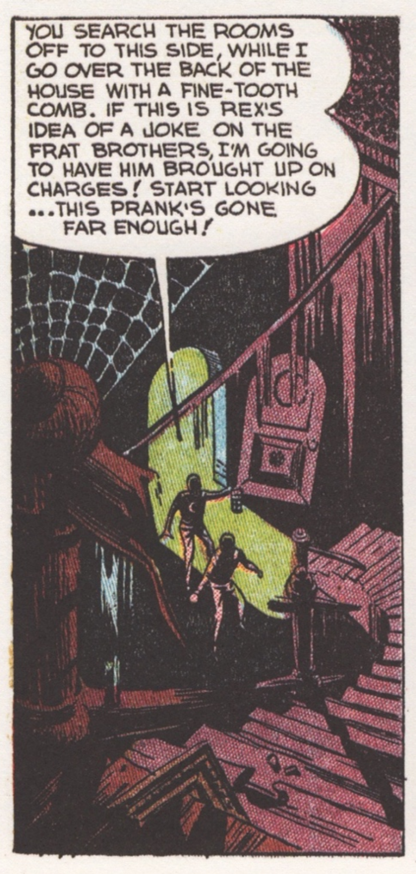
Terrified fraternity brothers enter a haunted house as a part of their hazing, where they are confronted with the jagged a jagged claustrophobic space, similar to the ones found in "Library of Horror." Art by Steve Ditko; the writer is currently unknown, if not Ditko. "Die Laughing," *The Thing* #13 (April 1954).

Figure 3.13


VANISHED, MY EYE! THEY'RE YELLOW, THAT'S WHAT! GOT TO THE SECOND FLOOR, THEN TURNED AROUND AND CAME BACK DOWNSTAIRS! THEY'RE PROBABLY CROUCHING BY THE FRONT ENTRANCE, SHAKING IN THEIR BOOTS! BUT THEY WON'T GET AWAY WITH IT...BREEN, C'MERE!

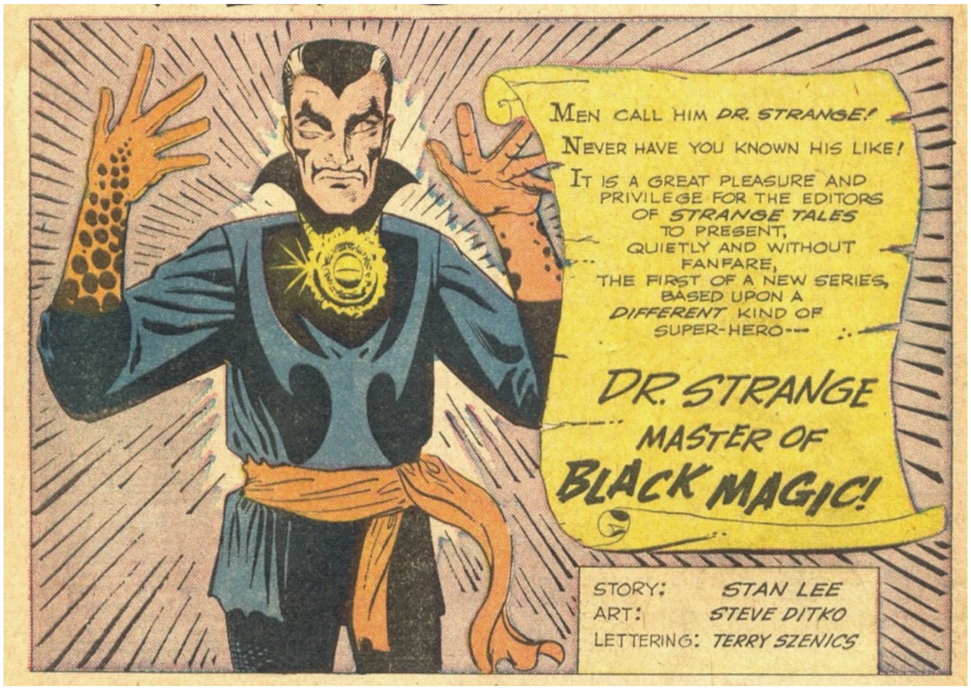
Although not rendered with as much detail as other panels, Ditko emphasizes the eeriness of the house by stripping its clutter down to jagged shapes and negative space cut through with wisps of fog. Art by Steve Ditko; the writer is currently unknown, if not Ditko. "Die Laughing," *The Thing* #13 (April 1954).

Figure 3.14


YOU SEARCH THE ROOMS OFF TO THIS SIDE, WHILE I GO OVER THE BACK OF THE HOUSE WITH A FINE-TOOTH COMB. IF THIS IS REX'S IDEA OF A JOKE ON THE FRAT BROTHERS, I'M GOING TO HAVE HIM BROUGHT UP ON CHARGES! START LOOKING ...THIS PRANK'S GONE FAR ENOUGH!

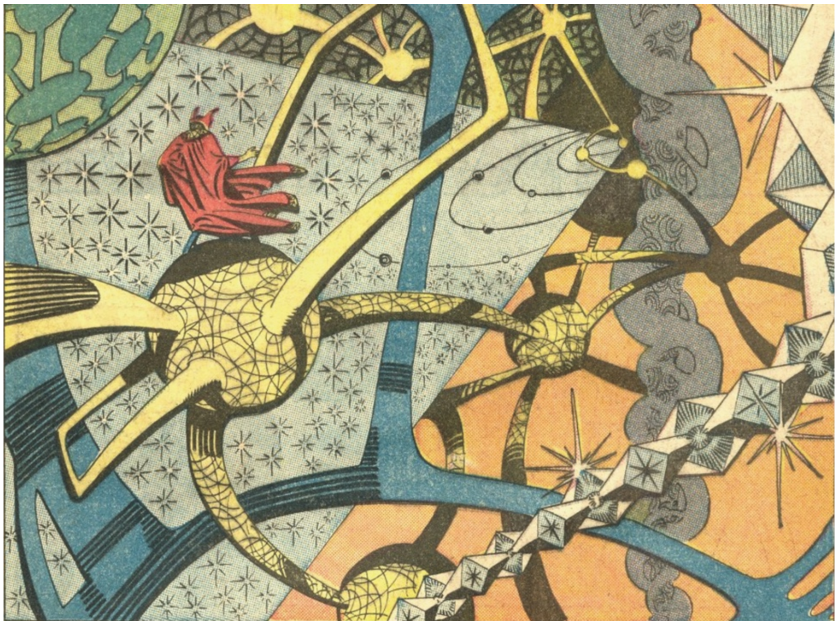
As the fraternity brothers move ever deeper into the house their confinement to the labyrinth of the haunted as the staircase spirals towards the dread that awaits and draws the boys in. Art by Steve Ditko; the writer is currently unknown, if not Ditko. "Die Laughing," *The Thing* #13 (April 1954).

Figure 4.1


MEN CALL HIM DR. STRANGE!
NEVER HAVE YOU KNOWN HIS LIKE!
IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE AND PRIVILEGE FOR THE EDITORS OF STRANGE TALES TO PRESENT, QUIETLY AND WITHOUT FANFARE, THE FIRST OF A NEW SERIES, BASED UPON A DIFFERENT KIND OF SUPER-HERO---
DR. STRANGE MASTER OF BLACK MAGIC!
STORY: STAN LEE
ART: STEVE DITKO
LETTERING: TERRY SZENICS

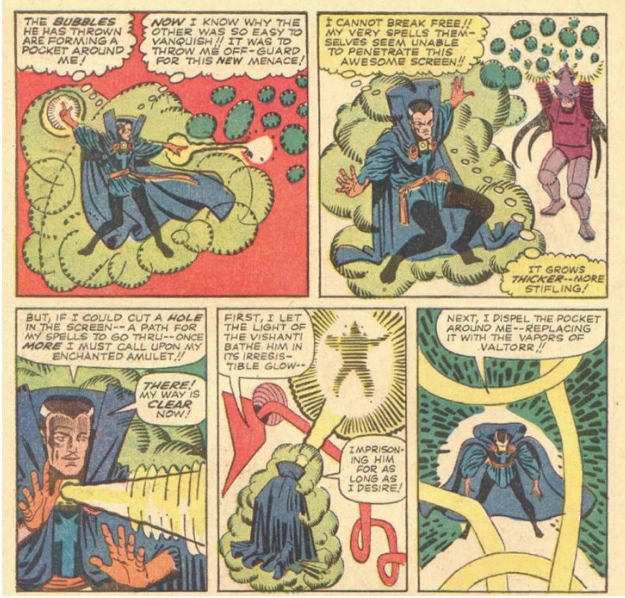
Dr. Strange makes his first appearance in his East Asian identity. Dialogue edited by Stan Lee; Steve Ditko art; Terry Szenics letters. “Dr. Strange Master of Black Magic!,” *Strange Tales* #110 (July 1963). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 4.2



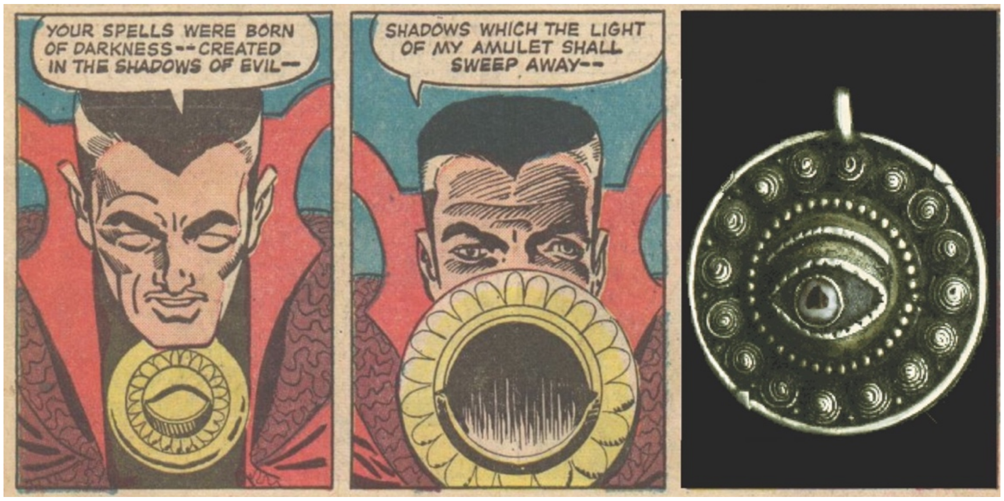
Dr. Strange looks out onto the vistas of cosmic intraspace in Eternity’s realm. Steve Ditko art. “If Eternity Should Fail!,” *Strange Tales* #138 (November 1965). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 4.3


THE BUBBLES HE HAS THROWN ARE FORMING A POCKET AROUND ME!
NOW I KNOW WHY THE OTHER WAS SO EASY TO VANQUISH!! IT WAS TO THROW ME OFF-GUARD FOR THIS NEW MENACE!
I CANNOT BREAK FREE!! MY VERY SPELLS THEMSELVES SEEM UNABLE TO PENETRATE THIS AWESOME SCREEN!!
IT GROWS THICKER--MORE STIFLING!
BUT, IF I COULD CUT A HOLE IN THE SCREEN-- A PATH FOR MY SPELLS TO GO THRU--ONCE MORE I MUST CALL UPON MY ENCHANTED AMULET!!
THERE! MY WAY IS CLEAR NOW!
FIRST, I LET THE LIGHT OF THE VISHANTI BATHE HIM IN ITS IRRESISTIBLE GLOW--
IMPRISONING HIM FOR AS LONG AS I DESIRE!
NEXT, I DISPEL THE POCKET AROUND ME--REPLACING IT WITH THE VAPORS OF VALTORR!!

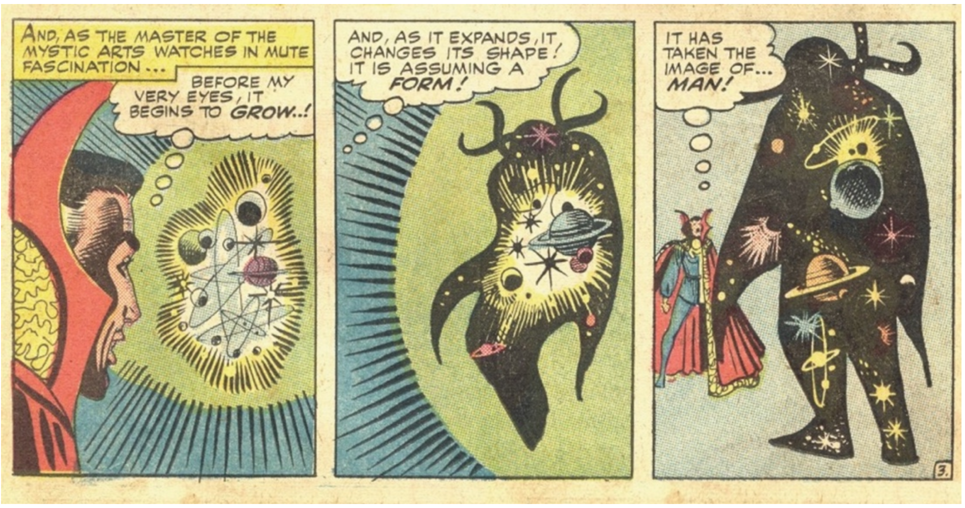
Encapsulated by a cloud of mystic energy, Dr. Strange struggles before relying on his cunning and using his enchanted amulet. Dialogue edited by Stan Lee; Steve Ditko art; Stan Goldberg colors; Artie Simek letters. “The Domain of the Dread Dormammu!,” *Strange Tales* #126 (November 1964). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 4.4


YOUR SPELLS WERE BORN OF DARKNESS--CREATED IN THE SHADOWS OF EVIL—
SHADOWS WHICH THE LIGHT OF MY AMULET SHALL SWEEP AWAY--

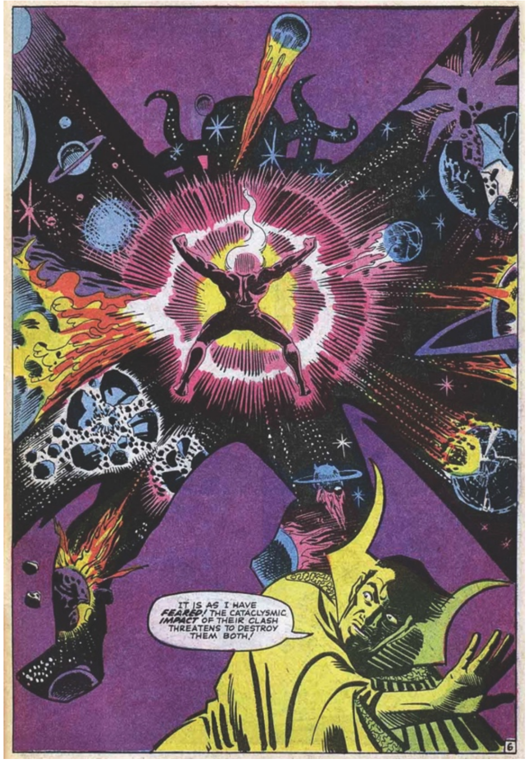
Dr. Strange received the Eye of Agamotto for his defeat of Dormammu and puts it to use in the very next issue (L and C). On the right is an image of the Eye of the Buddha talisman found in curio shops. Dialogue edited by Stan Lee; Steve Ditko art; Stan Goldberg colors; Artie Simek letters. “The Dilemma of The Demon’s Disciple!,” *Strange Tales* #128 (January 1965). © Marvel Comics. The Eye of the Buddha image is from Cat Yronwode’s Lucky Mojo Curio Company. Yronwode worked with Ditko at Eclipse Comics in the 1980s

Figure 4.5


AND, AS THE MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS WATCHES IN MUTE FASCINATION...
BEFORE MY VERY EYES, IT BEGINS TO GROW..!
AND, AS IT EXPANDS, IT CHANGES ITS SHAPE! IT IS ASSUMING A FORM!
IT HAS TAKEN THE IMAGE OF... MAN!
3.

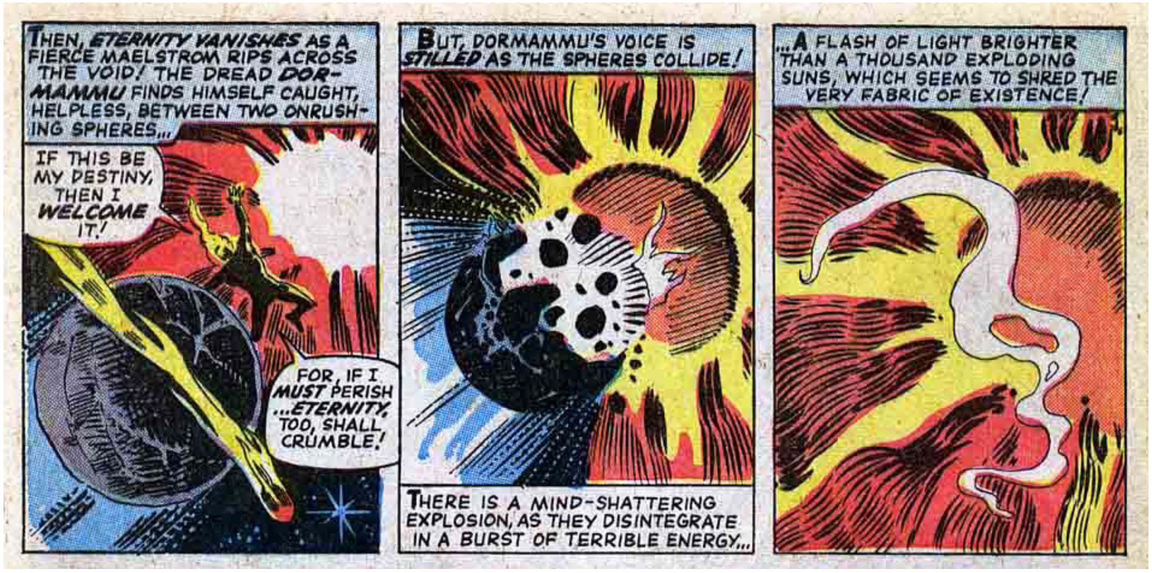
At last, Dr. Strange comes face to face with Eternity: the living embodiment of cosmic intraspace. Dialogue edited by Stan Lee; Steve Ditko art; Sam Rosen letters. "If Eternity Should Fail!," *Strange Tales* #138 (November 1965). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 4.6


IT IS AS I HAVE FEARED! THE CATACLYSMIC IMPACT OF THEIR CLASH THREATENS TO DESTROY THEM BOTH!
6

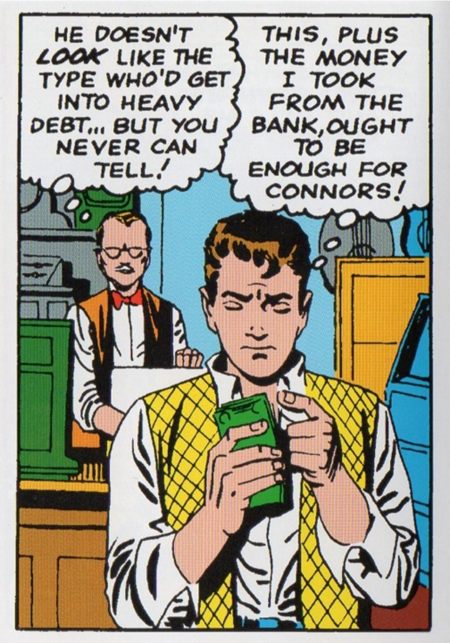
In their final epic clash, Dormammu is swallowed by the cosmic intraspace of Eternity. Dialogue by Dennis O'Neil; Steve Ditko art; Artie Simek letters. "The End—At Last!," *Strange Tales* #146 (July 1966). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 4.7


THEN, ETERNITY VANISHES AS A FIERCE MAELSTROM RIPS ACROSS THE VOID! THE DREAD DORMAMMU FINDS HIMSELF CAUGHT, HELPLESS, BETWEEN TWO ONRUSHING SPHERES...
IF THIS BE MY DESTINY, THEN I WELCOME IT!
FOR, IF I MUST PERISH ...ETERNITY, TOO, SHALL CRUMBLE!
BUT, DORMAMMU'S VOICE IS STILLED AS THE SPHERES COLLIDE!
THERE IS A MIND-SHATTERING EXPLOSION, AS THEY DISINTEGRATE IN A BURST OF TERRIBLE ENERGY...
...A FLASH OF LIGHT BRIGHTER THAN A THOUSAND EXPLODING SUNS, WHICH SEEMS TO SHRED THE VERY FABRIC OF EXISTENCE!

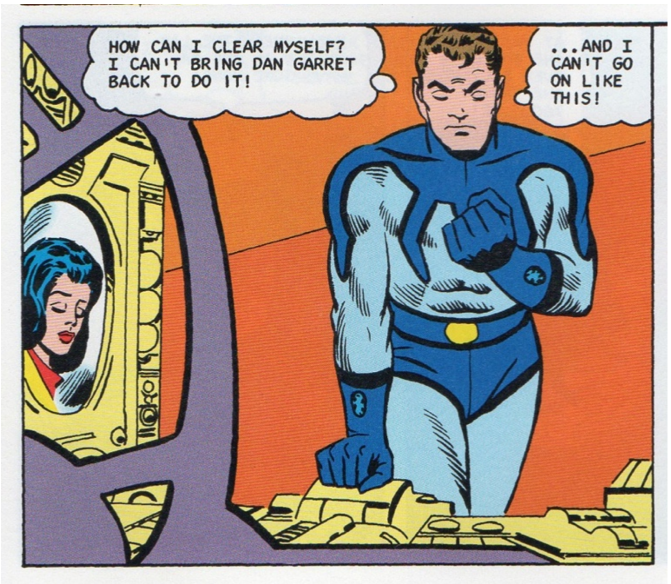
The final conflict between the oppositional forces of mind and anti-mind, life and anti-life are symbolically enacted as Dormammu is crushed between dark and light meteors. Dialogue by Dennis O'Neil; Steve Ditko art; Artie Simek letters. "The End—At Last!," *Strange Tales* #146 (July 1966). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 5.1


HE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THE TYPE WHO'D GET INTO HEAVY DEBT... BUT YOU NEVER CAN TELL!
THIS, PLUS THE MONEY I TOOK FROM THE BANK, OUGHT TO BE ENOUGH FOR CONNORS!

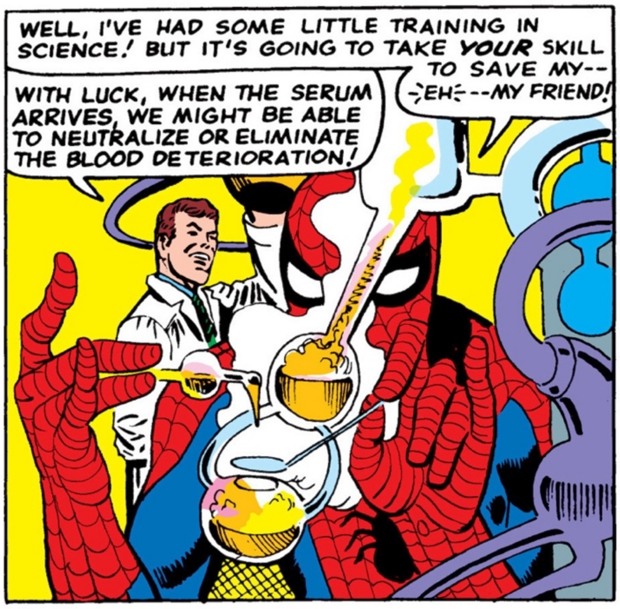
Peter Parker pawns his personal possessions to collect the money needed to help Curt Connors (aka The Lizard) develop a serum that will save Aunt May's life. Dialogue edited by Stan Lee; Steve Ditko art; Stan Goldberg colors; Artie Simek letters. "Man on a Rampage!," *The Amazing Spider-Man* #33 (January 1966). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 5.2


HOW CAN I CLEAR MYSELF? I CAN'T BRING DAN GARRET BACK TO DO IT!
...AND I CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS!

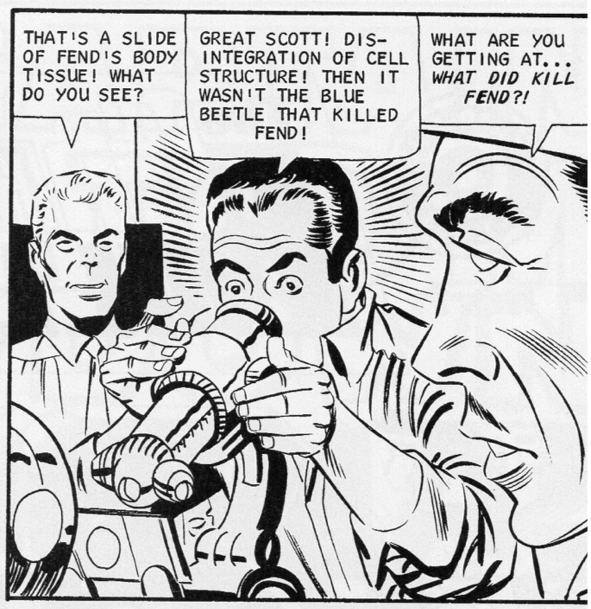
Ted Kord internally struggles to with being accused of the murder of Dan Garret (the previous Blue Beetle). Kord bears a striking, more adult, resemblance to Peter Parker as seen in figure 5.1. Dialogue by Gary Friedrich; art by Steve Ditko. ["The Masked Marauder"], *Captain Atom* #86 (June 1967). © DC Comics.

Figure 5.3


WELL, I'VE HAD SOME LITTLE TRAINING IN SCIENCE! BUT IT'S GOING TO TAKE YOUR SKILL TO SAVE MY-- EH--MY FRIEND!
WITH LUCK, WHEN THE SERUM ARRIVES, WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO NEUTRALIZE OR ELIMINATE THE BLOOD DETERIORATION!

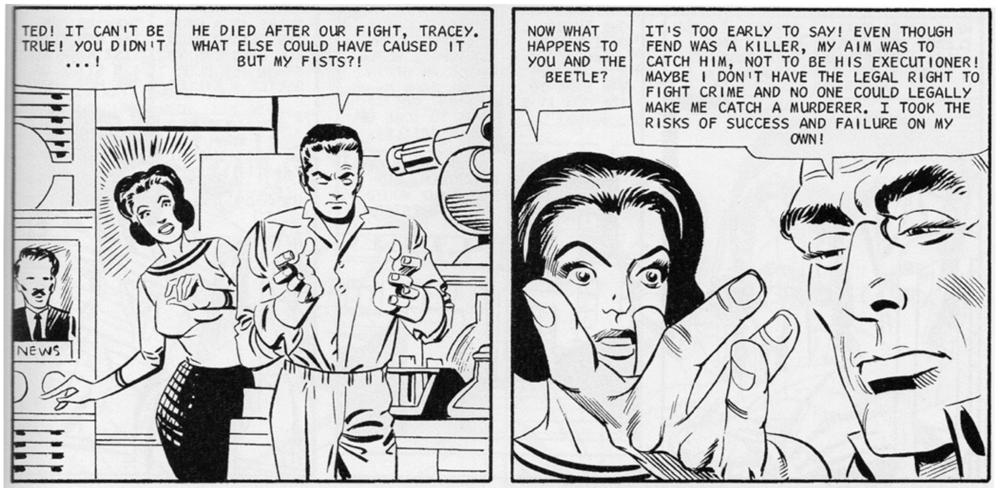
Peter Parker and Curt Connors bond over a mutual love of science as they work to create a serum that will save the life of Aunt May. Dialogue edited by Stan Lee; Steve Ditko art; Stan Goldberg colors; Artie Simek letters. "Man on a Rampage!," *The Amazing Spider-Man* #33 (January 1966). © Marvel Comics.

Figure 5.4


THAT'S A SLIDE OF FEND'S BODY TISSUE! WHAT DO YOU SEE?
GREAT SCOTT! DIS-INTEGRATION OF CELL STRUCTURE! THEN IT WASN'T THE BLUE BEETLE THAT KILLED FEND!
WHAT ARE YOU GETTING AT... WHAT DID KILL FEND?!

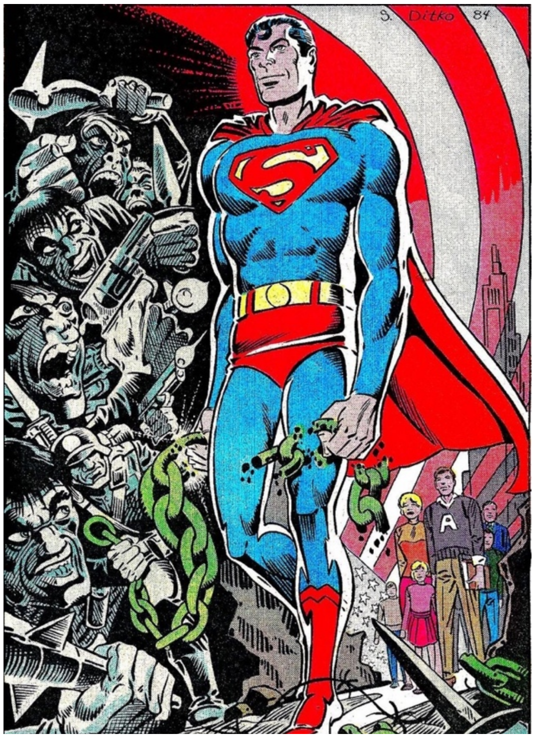
Just like Peter Parker and Curt Connors, Ted Kord and Tot Rodor bond over their mutual love of science. Also like the Parker/Connors relationship, Kord and Rodor employ their shared interest to solve Kord's problems. Dialogue and art by Steve Ditko (writing as D.C. Glanzman). Originally unpublished story intended for *Blue Beetle* #6. "A Specter is Haunting Hub City," *The Action Heroes Archive*, vol. 2 (2007). © DC Comics.

Figure 5.5


TED! IT CAN'T BE TRUE! YOU DIDN'T ...!
HE DIED AFTER OUR FIGHT, TRACEY. WHAT ELSE COULD HAVE CAUSED IT BUT MY FISTS?!
NEWS
NOW WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU AND THE BEETLE?
IT'S TOO EARLY TO SAY! EVEN THOUGH FEND WAS A KILLER, MY AIM WAS TO CATCH HIM, NOT TO BE HIS EXECUTIONER! MAYBE I DON'T HAVE THE LEGAL RIGHT TO FIGHT CRIME AND NO ONE COULD LEGALLY MAKE ME CATCH A MURDERER. I TOOK THE RISKS OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE ON MY OWN!

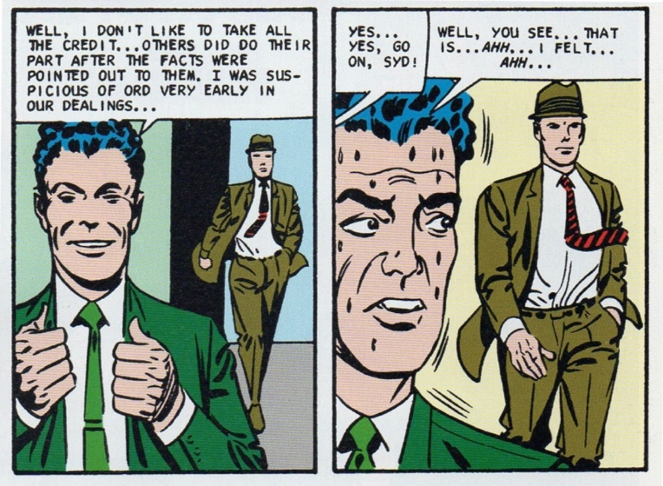
Like the crisis of conscience that Peter Parker regularly faced, Ted Kord, too, struggles with whether he should continue on as costumed hero. Dialogue and art by Steve Ditko (writing as D.C. Glanzman). Originally unpublished story intended for *Blue Beetle* #6. "A Specter is Haunting Hub City," *The Action Heroes Archive*, vol. 2 (2007). © DC Comics.

Figure 5.6



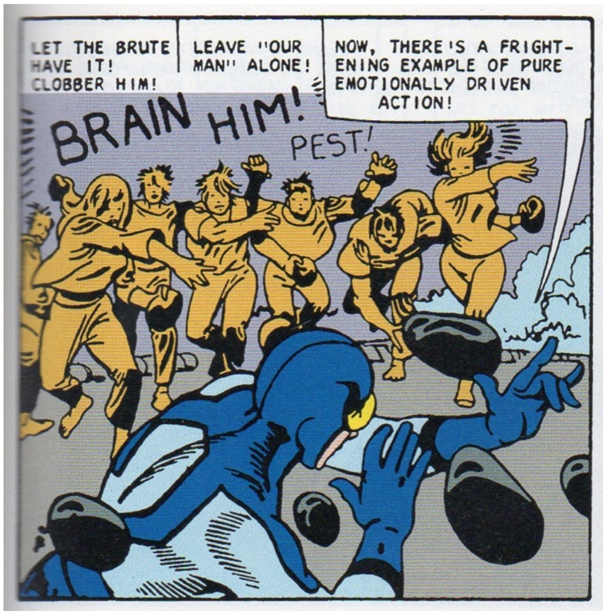
Classic Ditko motifs are employed to present Superman as an idealized hero, visualized by the character's posture and positioning on the page as he walks the middle path between violent symbols of anti-life and idealized symbols of life. Art by Steve Ditko; colors by Tom Ziuko. [untitled piece], *Superman* #400 (December 1984). © DC Comics.

Figure 5.7


WELL, I DON'T LIKE TO TAKE ALL THE CREDIT...OTHERS DID DO THEIR PART AFTER THE FACTS WERE POINTED OUT TO THEM. I WAS SUSPICIOUS OF ORD VERY EARLY IN OUR DEALINGS...
YES... YES, GO ON, SYD!
WELL, YOU SEE... THAT IS...*AHH*... I FELT... *AHH*...

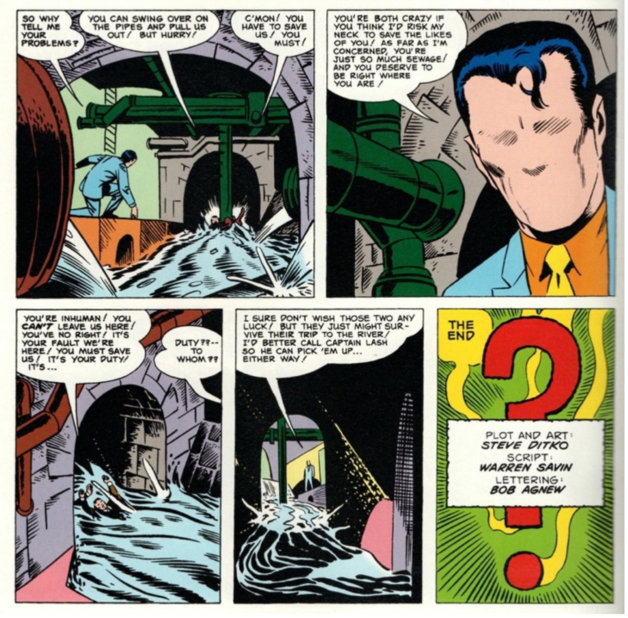
As a symbol of truth, reason, and integrity, the mere presence of Vic Sage fills with fear and nervous energy those who lack the drive and convictions Sage represents. Dialogue and art by Steve Ditko (writing as D.C. Glanzman). "What Makes a Hero?," *Mysterious Suspense* #1 (October 1968). © DC Comics.

Figure 5.8


LET THE BRUTE HAVE IT! CLOBBER HIM!
LEAVE "OUR MAN" ALONE!
NOW, THERE'S A FRIGHTENING EXAMPLE OF PURE EMOTIONALLY DRIVEN ACTION!
BRAIN HIM!
PEST!

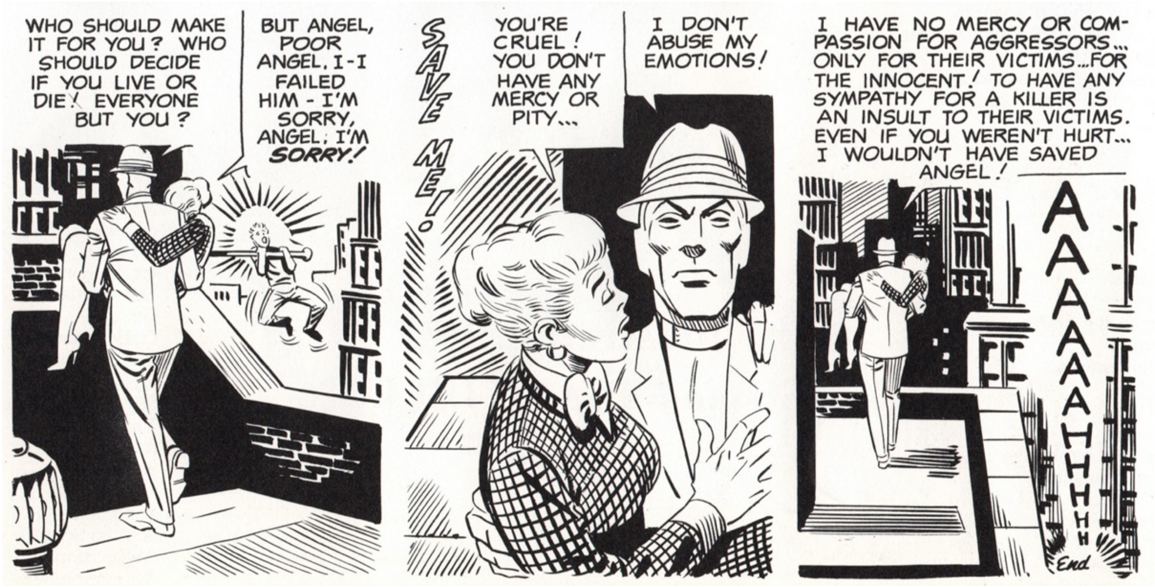
Blue Beetle is threated by a shoeless mob of hippies who, in Ditko's configuration, represent unthinking emotion; they are visceral reactions instead of disciplined, reasoned thoughts. Dialogue and art by Steve Ditko (writing as D.C. Glanzman). "The Destroyer of Heroes," *Blue Beetle* #5 (November 1968). © DC Comics.

Figure 6.1


SO WHY TELL ME YOUR PROBLEMS?
YOU CAN SWING OVER ON THE PIPES AND PULL US OUT! BUT HURRY!
C'MON! YOU HAVE TO SAVE US! YOU MUST!
YOU'RE BOTH CRAZY IF YOU THINK I'D RISK MY NECK TO SAVE THE LIKES OF YOU! AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED, YOU'RE JUST SO MUCH SEWAGE! AND YOU DESERVE TO BE RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE!
YOU'RE INHUMAN! YOU CAN'T LEAVE US HERE! YOU'VE NO RIGHT! IT'S YOUR FAULT WE'RE HERE! YOU MUST SAVE US! IT'S YOUR DUTY! IT'S...
DUTY??-- TO WHOM??
I SURE DON'T WISH THOSE TWO ANY LUCK! BUT THEY JUST MIGHT SURVIVE THEIR TRIP TO THE RIVER! I'D BETTER CALL CAPTAIN LASH SO HE CAN PICK 'EM UP... EITHER WAY!
THE END
PLOT AND ART: STEVE DITKO
SCRIPT: WARREN SAVIN
LETTERING: BOB AGNEW

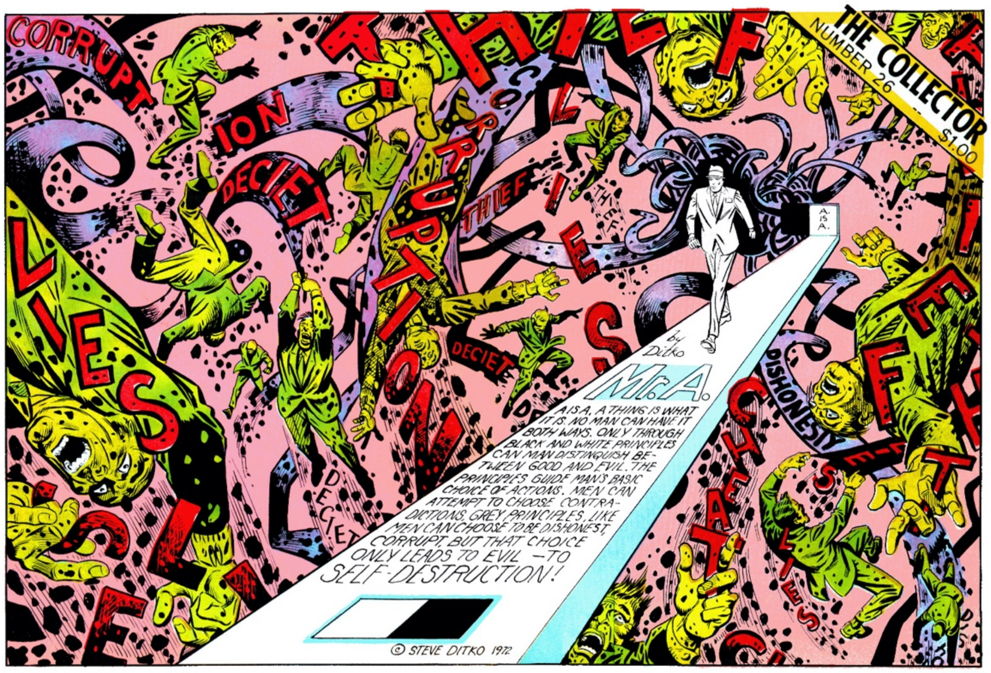
The Question looks on as his attackers are dragged into the tangle of the sewer where they will surely drown. Dialogue by Steve Skeates (as Warren Savin); art by Steve Ditko; Bob Agnew letters. "Kill Vic Sage!," *Blue Beetle* #4 (December 1967). © DC Comics.

Figure 6.2


WHO SHOULD MAKE IT FOR YOU? WHO SHOULD DECIDE IF YOU LIVE OR DIE! EVERYONE BUT YOU?
BUT ANGEL, POOR ANGEL. I-I FAILED HIM - I'M SORRY, ANGEL; I'M SORRY!
SAVE ME!
YOU'RE CRUEL! YOU DON'T HAVE ANY MERCY OR PITY...
I DON'T ABUSE MY EMOTIONS!
I HAVE NO MERCY OR COMPASSION FOR AGGRESSORS... ONLY FOR THEIR VICTIMS...FOR THE INNOCENT! TO HAVE ANY SYMPATHY FOR A KILLER IS AN INSULT TO THEIR VICTIMS. EVEN IF YOU WEREN'T HURT... I WOULDN'T HAVE SAVED ANGEL!
AAAAAAAHHHHHH
End

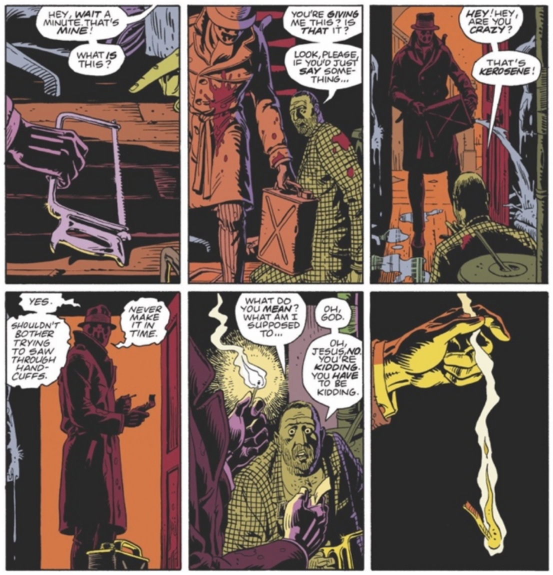
Mr. A allows a criminal to plummet to his death while explaining that he has no sympathy for those who would initiate force. Dialogue and art by Steve Ditko; Bill Spicer letters. [no title], *witzend* #3 (1967). © Steve Ditko.

Figure 6.3


THE COLLECTOR
NUMBER 26
$1.00
CORRUPT
ION
DECIET
THIEF
LIES
CORRUPTION
S
DISHONESTY
CHEATS
by Ditko
Mr. A.
A IS A, A THING IS WHAT IT IS. NO MAN CAN HAVE IT BOTH WAYS. ONLY THROUGH BLACK AND WHITE PRINCIPLES CAN MAN DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL. THE PRINCIPLES GUIDE MAN'S BASIC CHOICE OF ACTIONS. MEN CAN ATTEMPT TO CHOOSE CONTRADICTIONS, GREY PRINCIPLES, LIKE MEN CAN CHOOSE TO BE DISHONEST, CORRUPT, BUT THAT CHOICE ONLY LEADS TO EVIL —TO SELF-DESTRUCTION!
A IS A.
© STEVE DITKO 1972

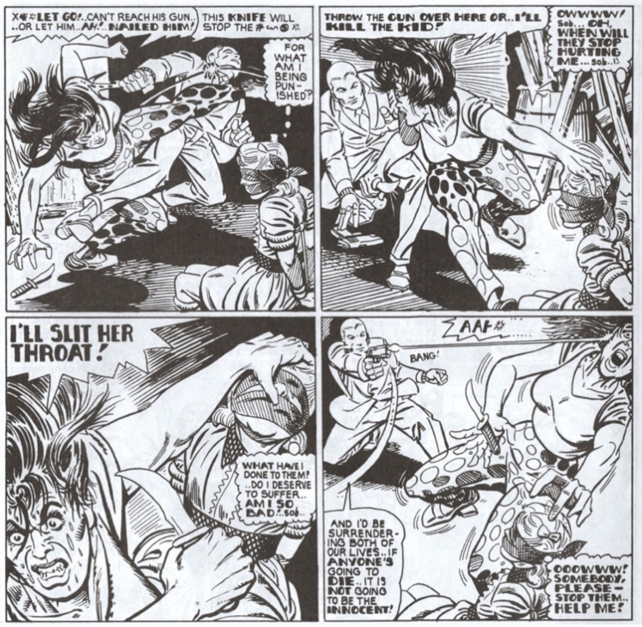
Emerging from a darkened opening, Mr. A walks down the narrow path of rationality, flanked on all sides by chaos and disorder in the external world. Text, art, and letters by Steve Ditko. *The Collector* #26 (1972). © Steve Ditko.

Figure 7.1


HEY, WAIT A MINUTE. THAT'S MINE!
WHAT IS THIS?
YOU'RE GIVING ME THIS? IS THAT IT?
LOOK, PLEASE, IF YOU'D JUST SAY SOMETHING...
HEY! HEY, ARE YOU CRAZY?
THAT'S KEROSENE!
YES.
SHOULDN'T BOTHER TRYING TO SAW THROUGH HANDCUFFS.
NEVER MAKE IT IN TIME.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN? WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO...
OH, GOD.
OH, JESUS, NO. YOU'RE KIDDING. YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING.

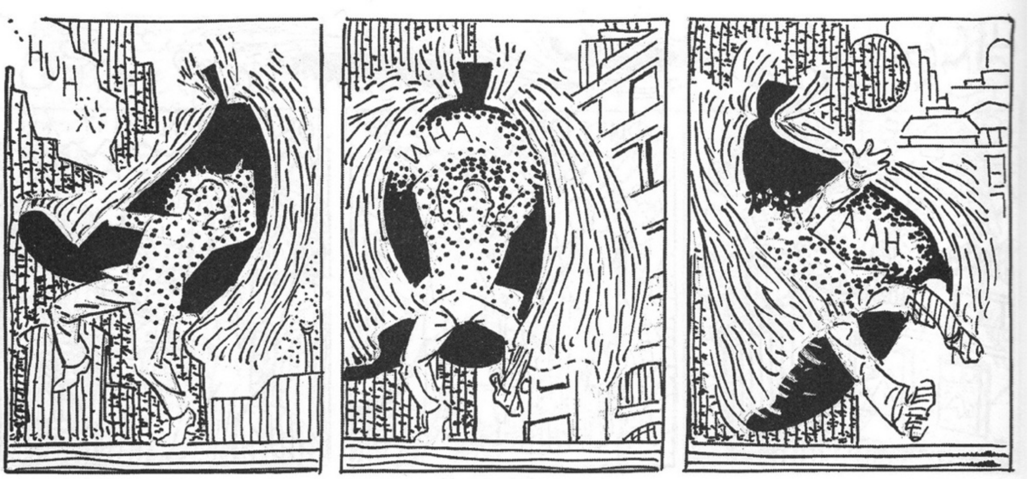
With deliberate parallel drawn between this moment and those found in Mr. A, Rorschach sets fire to man responsible for the murder of child. Written by Alan Moore; art and letters by Dave Gibbons; colors by John Higgins. "The Abyss Gazes Also," *Watchmen* #6 (February 1987). © DC Comics.

Figure 7.2


X✱☆LET GO!..CAN'T REACH HIS GUN.. ..OR LET HIM..AH!..NAILED HIM!
THIS KNIFE WILL STOP THE #~@☆
FOR WHAT AM I BEING PUNISHED?
THROW THE GUN OVER HERE OR..I'LL KILL THE KID!
OWWWW! Sob... OH, WHEN WILL THEY STOP HURTING ME... Sob..!
I'LL SLIT HER THROAT!
WHAT HAVE I DONE TO THEM? ..DO I DESERVE TO SUFFER... AM I SO BAD?..Sob..
ZAAF☆
BANG!
AND I'D BE SURRENDERING BOTH OF OUR LIVES..IF ANYONE'S GOING TO DIE.. IT IS NOT GOING TO BE THE INNOCENT!
OOOWWW! SOMEBODY, PLEASE – STOP THEM.. HELP ME!

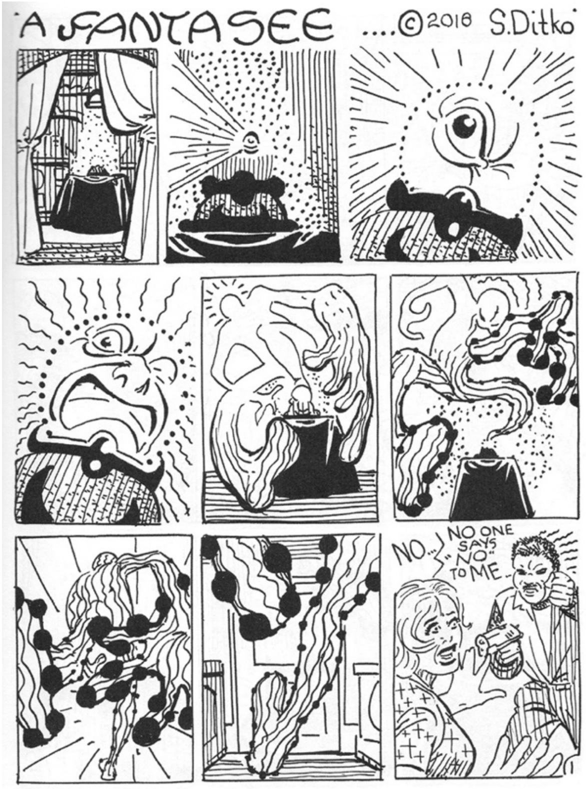
In a stunning sequence of violence, that moves the reader's eye in a roller coaster fashion, Mr. A shoots a kidnapper in the head after she threatens to slash the throat of her child victim. Text, art, and letters by Steve Ditko. "…Right to Kill!," *Mr. A* #1 (1973). © Steve Ditko

Figure 7.3



The Cape swallows up a nameless crook into the cosmic intraspace it contains within itself. Art, story, and letters by Steve Ditko. "The Cape," *The 32-Page Series: #2oww3oww* #23 (2015). © Steve Ditko.

Figure 7.4


A FANTASEE ....©2018 S.Ditko
NO..!
NO ONE SAYS "NO" TO ME..

A mysterious phantasm emerges from the mystic, interior space of a crystal ball in order to punish a man who murders a woman. Art, story, and letters by Steve Ditko. "A Fantasee," *The 32-Page Series* #26 (2018). © Steve Ditko.

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