

REWRITING SUPERMAN

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Reading Superman

. . . they come a running just as fast as they can,
'cause every girl's crazy 'bout a sharp dressed man.
-- ZZ Top (1983)

There is no neutral or innocent reading. Every reading happens in an intertextual context that reflects the experience and the interests of the reader. Reading transforms the text, doing violence to it. Reading changes text into something that it is not; to read a text is to make the silent page 'speak', to assign meaning to it. Every reading rewrites the text. However, some readings, by virtue of the ways in which they attend to the text, are both more deliberate and more innovative than others. These rewritings of text are simultaneously playful and serious, at once respectful and irreverent. The television series, Lois & Clark: the New Adventures of Superman, is one of these insightful and provocative readings, rewriting a story that has had a powerful grip on Americans and many others around the world since it first appeared almost 60 years ago.

In the following I reread the so-called 'messianic secret' of the gospel of Mark in an intertextual context provided by Lois & Clark's rewriting of the Superman tradition. The intertextual rereading and rewriting that is practiced here is therefore highly anachronistic, and it may be offensive to readers both Christian and otherwise. Why should we read out of context?

Why juxtapose such dissimilar texts as an ancient gospel and a contemporary TV series? Yet my anachronism here may be no more extreme than that of the messianic secret itself, which arises out of the contemporary reader's need to make sense of indeterminacies in Mark's strange and perplexing story. The truth is that readers always read in this way--that is, anachronistically, from when and wherever the reader is, which is always here and now. A more neutral or objective or properly contextual reading is simply not possible, although we often pretend that it is. The traditional notion of critical scholarship seeks to erect guarantees against such subjective misreadings, but all that it actually does is to affirm the propriety of one approach to reading (which thereby becomes 'objective' or 'scientific') over against 'improper' alternatives. Our notions of the author's intent, the original audience's understanding, or the preunderstandings of an actual, ideal, or implied reader are themselves always caught in and produced by the intertextual web of our own reading. A critical reading, and better yet, a self-critical one, is certainly more desirable than a non-critical reading; nevertheless, no reading, no matter how critical, moves any closer to escape from the hermeneutical limitation of every reading.

Lois & Clark rewrites the Superman tradition. This rewriting opens up a critique of the 'American monomyth' and of the Christian tradition from which the monomyth has been produced. Lois & Clark plays with the Superman idea even as it remains firmly within that tradition: if the original Superman tradition is a modernist one, and it is, then Lois & Clark must be postmodern. More than just warming over and updating the old stories, the new series is at once pastiche, parody, and homage, a truly new version that explicitly establishes self-referential, ironic distance from the original even as it maintains and continues the tradition.

The viewer does not have to be a Superman aficionado in order to understand and enjoy the new series, but it certainly helps.

The popular culture tradition of Superman has emerged in comic books, radio and television serials, animated cartoons, Broadway musicals, movies, and novels. The comic book series that first defined the Superman tradition was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1933, but it was not published until 1938, when it became an instant success and largely created the comic book in its contemporary form (Inge 1990: 131).¹ An extraterrestrial baby, Kal-el, arrives on Earth in a spaceship that had been launched by his scientist parents moments before the explosion of his home planet Krypton. In appearance Kal-el is human; however, he possesses physical powers far beyond those of humans, including the ability to fly, tremendous strength, x-ray vision, superior hearing, and invulnerability to bullets, explosions, and almost anything except for Kryptonite, a substance formed in the explosion of his home planet. In the early comic book episodes, Superman did not fly but instead made huge leaps or often simply ran very fast. In this and other ways, the Superman story has been rewritten by its authors over the years, and as Umberto Eco notes, this often takes the form of a retroactive revision of prior episodes (1979: 114).

1. An important precursor to the Superman comics was Philip Wylie's 1930 novel, The Gladiator (Jewett/Lawrence 1977: 185). For a brief history of the comic book, see Inge 1990: 131ff. The relation between Superman and Friedrich Nietzsche's Übermensch concept will not be considered here.

The alien child is raised by Eben and Mary Kent,² who live in the farm town of Smallville, Kansas; the Kents name the baby 'Clark'. After college, Clark Kent moves to the large city of Metropolis where he works as a 'mild-mannered' reporter for The Daily Planet (originally The Daily Star), a major newspaper. He falls in love with Lois Lane, another reporter for the Planet and a glamorous and beautiful woman. Lois, however, pays Clark little heed, for she has already fallen in love with Superman, the mysterious Man of Steel who has appeared suddenly in Metropolis to fight evil and do good.

Superman must maintain his secret identity as Clark Kent, and yet that secret must never keep him from doing good deeds (especially saving Lois) or stopping the forces of evil. Clark's plain blue business suit and horn-rimmed glasses contrast sharply with the red, blue, and yellow outfit that fits tightly over Superman's muscular body. Likewise, Clark's timid, awkward demeanor contrasts with Superman's calm confidence and aloof virtue. Superman is a benevolent Big Brother to all. This greatly impresses Lois Lane, who 'admires Superman's heroism and finds his tricot uniform infinitely more attractive than the business suit of the staid Clark Kent' (Jewett/Lawrence 1977: 69). Along with everyone else in the Superman stories, Lois is unaware that Clark is really Superman, although his only disguise is the suit and glasses. Furthermore, Superman is unwilling to reveal his double identity even to Lois, and the resulting Clark-Lois-Superman triangle forms the basis on which many of the Superman stories are built. It is (along with Kryptonite) one of the most important obstacles that keeps Superman from immediately accomplishing his mighty deeds (compare Eco 1979: 110-111). By deferring what

2. In the new series, Clark's human parents are named Martha and Jonathan.

would otherwise be the immediate solution of almost every problem that Superman faces, this strange triangle makes the stories possible, and interesting.

Robert Jewett and John Sheldon Lawrence discuss the Superman stories as classic examples of the American monomyth. In this monomyth,

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity (1977: xx).³

The American monomyth stands in sharp contrast to the 'classical monomyth' of traditional cultures, which features a human hero, such as Prometheus or Odysseus, who journeys to the realm of the gods and as a result of a series of trials gains power to be used for the benefit of other human beings (Jewett/Lawrence 1977: xix).

Each new comic book episode of Superman's story becomes a separate iteration of the monomythic story, without past or future. Eco describes the time paradox on which the Superman tradition depends:

The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate--of which the reader is not aware

3. Jewett and Lawrence provide numerous other examples of the American monomyth. I am doubtful, however, that this myth is uniquely 'American', and I suspect that variations on it would be found in other societies that are also products of European imperialism and colonialism.

at all--where what has happened before [in earlier episodes] and what has happened after appear extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again, as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said (Eco 1979: 114).

This establishes a temporal paradox, in which the sequence of events appears as an 'immobile present' (Eco 1979: 116). Jewett and Lawrence argue that this monomyth has come to dominate the American mentality during the twentieth century, with possibly very harmful consequences. The monomyth tells an escapist and anti-democratic story that encourages passivity in face of communal crisis. It arises from American secularization of the Jewish and Christian traditions, in particular the concept of a supernatural redeemer, 'combining elements from the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil' (Jewett/Lawrence 1977: xx).

Eco likewise argues that modern machine-dominated culture requires a greater-than-human hero (1979: 107). The monomyth hero thus stands in a peculiar relation to modern urbanized, industrial society (Inge 1990: 142), a society for which the 'human scale' of things has been lost. The hero is an outsider on whom contemporary humans project their desires and who reflects their ideology. The great enthusiasm of modern readers and viewers for the superhero arises from their own alienation from material conditions of the world as well as from other people. The Superman story is 'fantasy with a cynically realistic base', an 'underground truth' (Feiffer 1965: 18, 17).

Jewett and Lawrence focus upon the Superman tradition especially in relation to the

‘segmentation’ of sexuality from redemptive activity that is crucial to the American monomyth. This separation of sexuality from redemption is for Jewett and Lawrence one of the more disturbing features of the American monomyth. They note that as originally drawn in his superhero outfit, Superman apparently lacks genitalia (1977: 62). Clark Kent is a fumbling, ineffectual suitor to Lois Lane, whereas Superman is polite but distinctly uninterested in Lois’s romantic advances.⁴ He has no need of her, nor of any woman, for sex is irrelevant to Superman. Eco speaks of Superman’s ‘parsifalism’ as ‘one of the conditions that prevents his slowly "consuming" himself, and [that] protects him from the events, and therefore from the passing of time, connected with erotic ventures’ (1979: 115).⁵ Jewett and Lawrence compare Superman to an angel: he is sexless yet male, and his billowing cape resembles wings (1977: 62).

Jules Feiffer describes Clark Kent as a fiction created by Superman (‘a sacrificial disguise’) that reflects Superman’s low opinion of human beings (Feiffer 1965: 19):

Clark Kent loved but felt abashed with Lois Lane; Superman saved Lois Lane

4. In the 1981 movie, ‘Superman II’, Superman and Lois share a night of passion, which he then erases from her memory with a super-kiss. Clark remains the odd man out, merely a mask for the Man of Steel. In recent issues of the comic book, Superman has also become more erotically involved with women. He has also been murdered and, most recently, resurrected. These transformations of the story are significant, but they take us in different directions than Lois & Clark does.

5. In an episode from Lois and Clark’s fourth season, the slow speed at which Kal-el ages becomes an explicit aspect of the plot.

when she was in trouble, found her a pest the rest of the time. Since Superman and Clark Kent were the same person, this behavior demands explanation. It can't be that Kent wanted Lois to respect him for himself, since himself was Superman. Then, it appears, he wanted Lois to respect him for his fake self, to love him when he acted the coward, to be there when he pretended he needed her (Feiffer 1965: 20).

The difference in personality between Clark Kent and Superman also conceals their identity with one another. It is not clear, however, whether Clark's and Superman's respective behavior in this regard is a deliberate attempt to maintain their/his secret identity, as Feiffer suggests, or whether the contrast reflects instead two incompatible sides of his/their 'nature'. Are two distinct personalities present in Clark/Superman? Or if there is only one 'real' person, and the other one is a deception, then which of them is the real one?

Rewriting Superman

[S]urely our own needs and concerns . . . dictate not a willful and conspiratorial way of appropriating this text and using it for our purposes but a deeper relationship in which it is already somehow appropriated and rewritten (Jameson 1992: 229).

The new version of these popular stories raises fundamental questions about the American monomyth by inverting the narrative strategy of Superman's secret identity. The first few episodes of Lois & Clark present the discovery by the citizens of Metropolis that a

mysterious, powerful, alien being has chosen to live among them. They are immediately suspicious of him, but they also quickly come to rely upon him (in monomythic fashion) to save them from one crisis after another. The Metropolitans begin to regard Superman as a god, a point that the series makes explicit on several occasions. This is the monomyth in overt and extreme form. However, neither the character Superman nor the series itself is content with this Superman-worship. Clark Kent does not want to be worshipped; in fact, he doesn't even want to be Superman. He wants to be just another human being. What makes that impossible is 1) the fact that he is not a human being but a powerful alien, despite his human-like appearance, and 2) the fact that he truly is a nice guy who wants to help everybody, perhaps as a result of his middle-American, small-town upbringing.⁶

By making the monomyth, and Clark's rejection of it, explicit, the series encourages its audience to be aware of the power of the medium in which the series itself is presented and to question the significance and attraction of the story. In Lois & Clark, Superman's superhuman actions are often performed offscreen, or they are depicted in a non-realistic and often humorous 'comic book' style, with evidently 'special' effects in which the narrative discourse identifies itself with comic book and other popular culture conventions--that is, as fictional. For example, Superman's x-ray vision is depicted by twin cones of red light passing from his eyes to the object at which he is looking. If he is wearing his glasses--that is, if he is Clark--he lifts or

6. Roland Boer (private correspondence) suggests that 'nice guys' in twentieth-century Western culture are always alien, and further that 'small-town America as represented in Hollywood films is in fact alien rather than "typical."'

lowers the glasses before ‘turning on’ the x-rays. When he flies, Superman does not leap from the ground (as in the tradition), but he floats upward, sometimes accompanied by a ‘mysterious’ sound effect. The narrative effect of these depictions is a humorous downplaying of Superman’s powers. This is appropriate to the story, for the focus of the new series--as its title indicates--is not on Superman’s amazing powers but on the human relationship that Clark Kent struggles to maintain with Lois Lane in spite of Superman’s powers.

In the new version of the story, Superman emerges out of the tension between Clark’s acquired human values (simplistic morality combined with good will toward all) and his inherent extraterrestrial powers. In Lois & Clark, and contrary to Feiffer (and therefore contrary to the tradition), it is Clark Kent who creates Superman, not vice versa. Clark adopts the persona of Superman not so much through a deliberate choice but in reaction to unanticipated circumstances arising from his new urban lifestyle. The monomyth is inverted. This creates a moral paradox: ‘Clark Kent’ is not a conscious deception, as in the traditional version, but ‘Superman’ is, even though Superman is closer to the alien reality of Kal-el. Superman is a deception, and yet he is not. As Eco says, although for different reasons, Superman both is and is not consumed by the narrative. This adds a tragic quality to Clark’s character. The only undeceived ones are Ma and Pa Kent, to whom Clark frequently confesses his dilemma.

Lois & Clark often and explicitly mocks the Superman tradition, usually in a self-referential manner. It often reminds the viewer of the tradition and of its own rewriting of that tradition. When Clark discovers that he will need a disguise in order to maintain the human lifestyle that he prefers while performing superhuman deeds, Ma Kent sews for him the famous

outfit, but only after they try out dozens of combinations, in which recognizable outfits of many well-known comic book superheroes are rejected. The coining of the name 'Superman' (by Lois) and of various familiar phrases ('faster than a speeding locomotive') are amusingly depicted. When Superman first appears in costume flying over a crowd, someone shouts, 'It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a guy in tights and a cape!' Episodes during the first season of the series began with vignettes depicting the 'human side' of the superhuman being. Superman floats on his back in the clouds on a lazy Sunday afternoon, only to have his reveries disrupted by a passing flight of geese. He plays baseball by himself, batting and playing all the field positions at once by using his super-speed. Here also his profound loneliness and alienation are suggested. Clark heats his morning coffee (and Lois's, when she is not looking) by using x-ray vision.

Frequent humorous digressions also refer explicitly to the myth-making power of popular media. Singer/actor/politician Sonny Bono, in the role of the mayor of Metropolis, speaks well-known phrases from various popular songs that he recorded 30 years ago with Cher. Perry White, Clark's and Lois's editor at the Daily Planet, is an Elvis fanatic. When a media agent attempts to recruit him, Superman laughs at the suggestion that people might want to watch a TV show about him, but he also recognizes the practical need to license his image (so that profits from the sale of Superman toys can be used to benefit poor children, of course).

In other, more subtle ways, the series also rejects the monomyth. In the comic books, Clark moved to Metropolis when the elder Kents died. In the new series, Ma and Pa Kent are very much alive and active characters in the stories, not only stitching up Clark's Superman tights but frequently providing him with moral support and common sense advice. A repeated

scene features Ma and Pa standing side by side, each with a telephone in hand, talking to Clark. In one episode, Pa fears that Ma is having an affair, and he goes to live with Clark until things are worked out (and they are, with Clark's help). The Kents are initially the only humans who know of Clark's extraterrestrial origins, and they support Clark's desire to keep his alien identity secret and to lead a human life. They fear for his well-being as a superhero, and they dream that he will somehow find a nice girl and career happiness in the big city.

In the new series, Clark Kent is not at all the bumbling, socially inept wimp of old. Indeed, a large part of Clark's problem (in Lois & Clark) is that he does indeed care about humans, especially his friends and family but also anyone in need, and they also care about him. It is his strong, humane involvement with human beings that pressures Clark continually to use his super-powers--that is, it is Clark's (not Superman's) compassion and desire to help others that prevent him from simply refusing to use those powers. Superman is a fictitious role that Clark Kent must play out, because of who he really is.

The new Clark Kent has only become aware of his super-powers upon becoming an adult--there was no Superboy. Clark often returns to Smallville, where people remember him with affection as a 'good boy'. People in Metropolis also generally like Clark. Lois calls him her 'best friend', and she regards him with great warmth and eventually love, not contempt as in the Superman tradition. This contradicts the American monomyth, which presents the redemptive stranger/hero as a perpetual outsider, one who has no lasting commitments or connections to the local human community (Jewett/Lawrence 1977: 212). Similarly, Eco describes Superman (according to the tradition) as concerned exclusively with local evils (particularly crimes against

private property), while ignoring institutional or national evils (1979: 123-124). The monomyth hero is alienated from and in some ways indifferent to humanity. The hero displays the impassivity of an angel, sometimes even psychopathically so, as in the case of Batman or the Lone Ranger.

Superman in the new series is not the distant, superior, angelic being of the tradition; his relationships with people, and especially with both Lois and his evil enemies, such as Lex Luthor, are distinctly personal. Nor is Superman above the law, as is the monomyth hero (Jewett/Lawrence 1977: 196); he does occasionally break the law, but then he willingly goes to jail, or at least displays guilt. When Lois is wrongly jailed, he anguishes over whether to break her out. At other times, he has Lex Luthor dead to rights but refuses to capture or harm him, because to do so would violate Lex's civil rights. In addition, the new Clark/Superman is very much concerned about systemic and institutional evils (such as pollution or poverty), which the series typically depicts as the product of the greed of the wealthy few.⁷ In Lois & Clark, evil does not simply equal crimes against private property.

However, the most fundamental rejection of the American monomyth in Lois & Clark concerns Superman's sexuality--that is, his relation to Lois Lane. This is precisely the point at which Jewett and Lawrence focus on the Superman tradition in relation to the monomyth. Contrary to Feiffer's claim, Clark does want Lois to love him 'for himself'--to love the human being, Clark Kent. The only way Lois can ever really know, much less love, Superman is by

7. This is not, however, to suggest that Lois & Clark presents anything remotely like a sustained critique of contemporary American institutional structures or values.

knowing and loving Clark. Lois must love Clark not because he is ‘really’ Superman, but simply as the human male (who just happens to be from another planet!) who loves her. Thus what appears as Superman’s angelic parsifalism is the direct result of Clark’s genuine, very human and male, desire for Lois. Clark is jealous of Lois’s attraction to Superman, and he rightly sees it as a formidable obstacle to a genuine relationship with her. However, Lois initially loves only the power and glamour of the Man of Steel: she loves the monomyth hero. This becomes apparent when she almost marries the evil billionaire, Lex Luthor, to whose power and fame she is attracted after her affections have been rejected once too often by Superman (who does so only because he wants her to love Clark Kent!).

Lois must recognize Superman in Clark Kent and not choose Superman instead of Clark. She will overcome her monomythic desire when she can love the human being Clark Kent. This is in fact what happens in Lois & Clark in the first episode of its third television season: Lois ‘recognizes’ Superman in Clark just as Clark finally decides that he must reveal the truth to her (he cannot go on lying to the woman that he loves). Lois discovers Clark’s dual identity at the very moment that she falls in love with him--that is, with Clark, not Superman. Perhaps it is because she has fallen in love with Clark that she can now recognize him as Superman. In any case, despite this radical break with the Superman tradition, the Clark-Lois-Superman triangle continues to dominate the narrative. From this point on, the pressure is on Lois to help Clark maintain the secret. This she does in various ways, from distracting others so that Clark can disappear and Superman appear without attracting attention, to more direct and heroic actions to save Superman (and thus Clark) from increasingly-powerful adversaries.

Identity and Reality

Superman, then, must remain "inconsumable" and at the same time be "consumed" according to the ways of everyday life. He possesses the characteristics of timeless myth, but is accepted only because his activities take place in our human and everyday world of time (Eco 1979: 111).

Roland Barthes defines the hermeneutic code as 'all the units whose function it is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even, constitute an enigma and lead to its solution' (1974: 17). The hermeneutic code plays a crucial role in the distinction between the "readerly" and the 'writerly' text, for the hermeneutic code enacts Roman Jakobson's poetic function of language (Barthes 1974: 75, Jakobson 1987: 66ff.)--that is, the dominant linguistic function in the literary text. The hermeneutic code is one of five codes through which Barthes reads Honoré de Balzac's story, 'Sarrasine', in S/Z. It is through these codes that intertextuality comes into play, to generate the plurality of the text's meanings.⁸

The readerly text possesses the totality of a coherent sentence. It leads the reader to a decisive, singular meaning, through a reading that seems effortless, entirely passive. For the readerly text, a question is clearly asked, and a definitive answer is given. 'Sarrasine' is a readerly text, and it asks (with its character, the Marquise de Rochefide) the question, 'What is the secret of Monsieur de Lanty, of his wealth and of his strange un-humanness?' To this

8. On intertextuality, especially in relation to biblical texts, see Aichele/Phillips 1995 and Aichele 1996, especially chapter 7.

question it offers as answer the story of Madame de Rochefide's would-be seducer, the story-within-the-story of Sarrasine and La Zambinella.

The hermeneutic code thus plays a highly significant role in the operation of the readerly text. However, when the text is a writerly one, then the hermeneutic play of question and answer (or between the giving and withholding of an answer) is transformed. The writerly text subverts the readerly, opening it to multiple and inconsistent meanings. The writerly designates an inconclusiveness and inadequacy of the text that demands from the reader active involvement in the production of meaning. The text itself displays a deficiency that must be supplemented in order for the story to be completed. The writerly emerges from the readerly as the inevitable incompleteness of written language. This hermeneutic incompleteness appears in the story 'Sarrasine' in the form of La Zambinella's castration. It is also reflected in the deviation of meaning, the anger of the Marquise and her rejection of the seducer, and thus it appears as 'a generalized collapse of economies':

The route of castration, strictly speaking, discovers the pandemic void of desire, the collapse of the creative chain (bodies and works). . . . it is fatal, the text says, to remove the dividing line, the paradigmatic slash mark which permits meaning to function (the wall of the Antithesis), life to reproduce (the opposition of the sexes), property to be protected (rule of contract) (1974: 215).

The traditional Superman stories are presented in readerly texts, for which the question, 'Who is Clark Kent?' receives the definitive answer, 'A strange being from another planet, stronger than a locomotive, etc.--namely, Superman!' The goal of the stories is to prevent the

secret of Clark's true identity from being revealed and yet to meet whatever challenge currently faces the Man of Steel. Thus the fundamental problem in the Superman tradition has always been a metaphysical one: that is, it is a problem of identity, of essence. Conversely, the one great mystery of the Superman stories, including the comic books, TV series, and movies, has always been: why does Superman need a secret identity at all? Wouldn't this powerful being from outer space be able to serve humanity much better, since that is what he wants to do, if he were Superman 'full time'? Why does he have to pretend to be the human weakling Clark Kent, or anyone other than himself? Since he already has god-like attributes, why doesn't he simply take control of the police, the government, or the entire world if necessary (Eco 1979: 123)--for the sake of human well-being? It is this that, as Feiffer says, 'demands explanation.'

Deborah Joy LeVine, the creator of the new Superman series, has rewritten the tradition around this question, with profound modification to the characters of Clark Kent and Superman (as well as Lois Lane and others). What was a readerly story has become a writerly one. LeVine has in effect inverted the identity of Superman, so that what was merely a 'complication' of the traditional Superman story has become the central focus of Lois & Clark. In the new version, Clark Kent is not just a mask behind which a real being called Superman is hiding. Clark is not a disguise in which this marginal outsider, this illegal alien (Gates 1993) passes for human in the modern world. Instead, Clark is the reality of Superman, and Superman is the mask.

[LeVine] has made a major contribution to the Superman myth: she has effectively reversed the roles of Clark Kent and his super [alter] ego. While traditionally Superman has been the "real" person and Clark Kent the fictional

character, in this series Clark Kent is real and Superman is the alter ego, the fictionalized version of the self (Gates 1993).

In Lois & Clark, 'Superman' refers to superhuman or otherworldly powers that the apparently white, middle-class male Clark Kent has found mysteriously but irrefutably attached to himself. As Clark says in an episode from the second year, 'Superman is what I can do; Clark is who I am.' However, although he is apparently entitled to all the privileges of the American system, Clark knows himself to be 'other', an intruder in some fundamental way outside of that system. Lois & Clark takes humorous note of his questionable social status, and even illegality, in almost every episode. Clark is not evidently a member of an oppressed group; nevertheless, his identity is 'diasporic'. He is the outsider as exile, refugee, and orphan.

Clark's parents tell him that they are not his natural parents, and that they found him in a crashed space capsule. Later on Superman receives confirmation of his extra-terrestrial origin when a holographic globe from the capsule projects messages to him from his long-dead Kryptonian parents. This is the ultimate alienation fantasy come true.⁹ However, the Kents have raised Clark in a warm and loving home as a stereotypical kind-hearted, middle American young man. The effect on Clark of his own awareness of his non-human identity is not to cause him to rejoice in his otherness, but to make him want all the more to be truly human. On the one hand, he wants to reject his superhuman powers, everything that makes him 'special', but on the other, his compassion for the needs of humanity requires that he use his powers frequently.

This answers Eco's question why Superman doesn't simply use his powers to take

9. Compare also the recent movie Total Recall (Verhoeven 1990).

control of the entire planet Earth. Superman's primary interest in local, as opposed to national or international, evil is the direct result of Clark's profound ambivalence toward his own powers. Clark's problem is not to hide from Lois Lane (and everyone else) the fact that he is 'really' Superman (that beneath the familiar surface lies an alien reality), but to reveal to Lois (and to at least the viewing audience) that this inescapable Superman is 'really' Clark (that the awesome alien is just as 'human' as the nice guy at the office--in fact, he is that nice guy).

But how can this truth be revealed? How can the deepest truths about oneself--and this surely would qualify as one--ever be revealed? How could this superhuman being from another planet be nothing more than Clark Kent, who only wants to be loved and treated as a human being? What Clark wants to reveal to Lois is therefore not the truth about himself, but rather it is the non-truth (the ideological fiction) that has been imposed upon him, not by Superman, but by the Kents and his adoptive middle American world (and less directly, by his Kryptonian parents). At the same time, however, what Clark wants to reveal to Lois is that her desire for Superman is itself a desire to escape from her own humanity, a desire for the monomythic immobilizing of responsibility. As soon as Lois (and viewers) can be content with the human being Clark Kent to satisfy their desires, then she (and they) will no longer need the Superman monomyth. Yet Lois can no more settle for Clark than she could be happy in Smallville (except as a visitor), no more than viewers can believe that the world of Lois & Clark really exists--no more than anyone can believe true what she knows to be a fiction. Even after she recognizes Clark in Superman, Lois continues to be torn between Clark and Superman, desiring what only Superman can give her even when she is most content with Clark.

However, Clark Kent is not just the man that Superman wishes he could be. Instead, Superman is the being that Clark wishes he weren't! The 'reality' of either Clark or Superman cannot be determined by who Clark, or Superman, believes he is. Therefore, a psychologizing approach cannot resolve Clark's and Lois's dilemma. The truth about Superman's identity is an uncanny one, in Sigmund Freud's sense of that term: that which is most foreign is somehow also that which is most familiar. Nothing is stranger than we ourselves are. The task of Lois & Clark is not to resolve this uncanniness, but to uncover it--to reveal the 'oneiric climate' of the monomyth for what it is.

Nor can the problem of Superman's identity be resolved simply by using essentialist notions of human or superhuman nature. Thus a metaphysical approach is also doomed to failure. Although it is clear what this strange being is not (he is not originally from Earth), it is not clear what he is. The existentialists based their philosophy around paradoxes generated by questions of personal identity and reality, and more recently, postmodernists have questioned whether the concept of a deep truth about one's self makes any sense at all. The self is a construct, that is, a fabrication or fiction. The self is not merely the product of some prior and objective nature, but rather the product of socio-cultural formation, that is, of ideology. Barthes notes that 'nature' itself is also a construct, a product of ideology (1986: 65-66). Jewett and Lawrence, Eco, Thomas Inge, and Feiffer all stress the ideological dimensions of the Superman tradition. Kal-el's Kryptonian nature, Clark's human nature, and Superman's superhuman nature are all products of the same story.

Walter Benjamin said of Franz Kafka's stories, that '[b]oth the psychoanalytic and the

theological interpretations equally miss the essential points” (1968: 127). Like Kafka’s distinctly non-monomythic heroes, Clark Kent is in a hopeless situation. He is an exile, a product of diaspora. Clark’s identity is not ‘the already given content of an individual body but rather . . . [it] is produced by the geographical circulation of diasporic bodies’ (Mostern 1994). While it is true that the traditional Superman only pretended to be human, in docetic fashion, the new Superman desires to be human. It is desire for the human that drives Lois & Clark, desire that subverts the monomyth. Clark does not fit; he is out of place in a world in which his super-powers stand between him and that which he desires. His identity is a non-identity, just as his truth is a non-truth: neither human nor superhuman, both human and superhuman. Lois & Clark shows us how artificial and thoroughly ideological questions of identity and reality always are.

In an episode from the new series’ second year, Clark finds that another woman (a lawyer with the amusingly intertextual name of Mason Drake) is attracted to him, and not at all interested in Superman (‘he’s a lot shorter in person than you’d think’; ‘you’re not flying around with a big red S on your chest’). Clark confesses his confusion to Ma and Pa Kent: ‘Mason likes me--or Clark--but she hates Superman. Lois loves Superman but only likes Clark. Mason likes Clark but in a different way than Lois does.’ To which Ma replies: ‘Oh, Clark, I’ve been afraid something like this was going to happen . . . you’re beginning to talk about yourself in the third person!’ The episode ends, however, with Lois and Superman (not Clark) dancing cheek to cheek in mid-air, much to Lois’s delight.

Through its rejection of the American monomyth Lois & Clark reveals and subverts the

ideology of the self-identical self, regardless of whether that self is called the “ego” or the ‘soul’. At the same time, these stories refuse the iterative timelessness of myth to which Eco points. Clark Kent creates the fiction of Superman,¹⁰ and like any self, the persona of Superman is the unfinished product of a continuing dialectic, in everyday irreversible time, with other people--the Kents and Lois Lane, mostly, but also Clark’s friends at the Planet as well as evil-doer enemies such as Lex Luthor, and finally all the Metropolitans who come to depend upon (and worship) Superman. And yet, behind the fiction that is Superman lies another fiction, which is Clark Kent himself, and behind that fiction lies the fiction that is middle America, and so on--an endless chain of fictions.

The old Superman of the monomyth reflects the human desire for totalitarian solutions, the desire that has (re)surfaced so dreadfully and in so many ways during the present century.¹¹ If Superman is the truth and Clark the illusion, as the tradition has it, then Superman reinforces the concept of an established superhuman reality--a law that must be so. Superman is the great paranoid desire; all resistance is useless. On the other hand, by rejecting the monomyth the new

10. The name ‘Superman’ itself is apparently created around the S-like emblem that the Man of Steel wears on his chest, an emblem sent with him in the spaceship from Krypton. In Lois & Clark, it is Lois who first calls the superhero ‘Superman’; he does not choose the name for himself.

11. The temporal conjunction between the initial creation of the Superman story, in 1933, and the spread of fascism in Europe, supported in part by (mis)reading of Nietzsche’s ‘superman’ texts, will not be pursued here, although it is probably quite important.

version of the story presents us with a Superman constantly in flux, constantly being (re)created--what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might call a schizophrenic Superman, a rhizomatic Superman (1983)--an illusion that can be recognized but never defined because the 'reality' that is its opposite pole (that is, Clark Kent) turns out to be just another level of illusion. Superman remains physically undefeatable, as in the monomyth, but his fractured identity weakens him in other ways. In fact, in regard to Lois Lane it is Superman, not Clark Kent, who is nearly paralyzed: the Kryptonite cage in which Lex Luthor imprisons Superman while he prepares to marry Lois makes explicit this paralysis.

Superman Rewrites the Gospel of Mark.

[T]here is nothing hidden except to be shown, nor anything concealed except to be brought to light (Mark 4.22).

Similarities between the old Superman of the monomythic tradition and the Jesus Christ of Christian tradition are easy to find. This is perhaps much of the point of the monomyth analysis in which Jewett (a New Testament scholar) and Lawrence engage. Both Jesus Christ, as understood by mainstream Christianity, and Superman are 'strange visitors' who are not of this world, with powers far beyond those of ordinary human beings, although both appear in human form and have been raised since earliest childhood as human beings in relatively out-of-the-way places. Both use their powers in a war on behalf of good and against evil. As of the latest run of Superman comic books, both have died at the hands of evil powers, and both have been raised up

again.¹²

The gospel of Mark even presents the notion that Jesus had a secret identity. For the last 100 years or more, many scholars have argued that a distinctive theme of the gospel of Mark is that Jesus (during at least the first half of that book) does not want his identity as ‘Christ, the son of God’ (Mark 1.1, RSV) to be known. Jesus refuses to allow unclean spirits to identify him as God’s son (1.24, 3.12; but compare 5.7), although the reader ‘overhears’ the claims of the spirits, just as the viewer sees Clark Kent remove his glasses and strip off his homely business suit to expose his brightly colored Superman outfit. However, in the latter half of Mark, Jesus appears to be more willing to let the secret out. The tide begins to turn in Jesus’s confrontation with the disciples at Caesarea Philippi (‘Then he asked them: And you, who do you say I am? Peter answered and said to him: You are the Christ. Then he warned them to tell no one about him’, 8.29-30). The revelation of Jesus’s identity culminates first with his dramatic confession before the Jewish high priest (‘Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One? Jesus said: I am he,’ 14.61-62) and then with the gentile centurion’s ‘confession’ at the moment of Jesus’s death (‘In truth this man was the Son of God’, 15.39). Therefore even though Mark ends abruptly at 16.8 with great uncertainty as to whether the message of Jesus’s resurrection will be spread, or whether he will meet again with his disciples, the reader has nonetheless ‘got the message’ that

12. In Lois & Clark it is Lex Luthor who is resurrected, midway through the second year of the series. Lex’s suicidal plunge, after his evil intentions had been at last revealed by Clark/Superman, concluded the final episode of the series’ first year. Lex’s dead body was kept in high-tech suspended animation.

Jesus is indeed the Christ.

So goes the widely-accepted reading of Mark's 'messianic secret'. This reading presents the gospel of Mark as a readerly text, in which the hermeneutic code, the solving of a mystery, plays a dominant function. The question that drives the plot of Mark is, Who is Jesus? The traditional answer is, Jesus is really the messiah, just as in the Superman tradition, Clark Kent is really Superman. Certainly Mark's presentation of the problem of Jesus's identity sets that book off from, and in important ways over against, other biblical gospels, and perhaps even the New Testament as a whole. However, when we look at Mark through the reading lens provided by Lois & Clark and the way that the TV series has rewritten the Superman tradition, we can understand the messianic secret in Mark in a rather different light.

Read through the lens of Lois & Clark, the gospel of Mark is not a readerly text. Instead, Mark is what Barthes calls a writerly text (1974: 5), a text which refuses to answer our questions. The hermeneutic code (in Barthes's sense of the term) is interrupted and paralyzed, and Jesus's identity remains obscure. The problem in Mark is not to conceal who Jesus really is (namely, the messiah), but rather to reveal who messiah really is: namely, a son of Mary (Mark 6.3) named Jesus. Mary's other sons are identified as 'James and Joseph and Judas and Simon', and his sisters are also mentioned, but there is no reference to the human father of Jesus in Mark. Jesus identifies God as the father of the son of man (8.38, compare 13.32) and as the father of those who pray (11.25), and he refers to God as 'Abba, father' when he prays in Gethsemane (14.36). However, to transform these texts into evidence that Jesus is the Son of a divine Father requires a leap of reading (or of faith) that the gospel of Mark alone cannot justify.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus rejects the messianic ‘son of God’ language of the unclean spirits, the disciple Peter, the high priest, the centurion, and even the narrator. Jesus tells the demons to be quiet when they call him “son of God,” and when Peter answers the question, ‘who do you say I am?’ by saying, ‘You are the Christ’, Jesus’s response is to ‘warn them to tell no one about him’ (Mark 8.30). Is he keeping a secret, or is he rejecting the reliability of the disciples’ teaching, based on Peter’s answer?¹³ It appears that Mark’s Jesus does not want to be the son of God, or Christ, just as Clark Kent does not want to be Superman. The gospel of Mark’s version of the Caesarea Philippi story is very troublesome, and it is not surprising that when we compare the ways that Matthew and Luke handle their parallels to the Caesarea Philippi passage, we find that in each case, they clean up the ambiguous language. In the other biblical gospels, Jesus clearly says, in effect, ‘yes, I am definitely the Christ’ (Mt. 16.16-20, Lk. 9.20-21).

However, in the gospel of Mark, Jesus rejects the Christ-language of Peter. Instead Jesus tells the disciples about the suffering and death of the ‘son of man’, and he gets into an exchange of rebukes with Peter over this matter (8.31-33). In the gospel of Mark, only Jesus uses this highly ambiguous son of man terminology--and even then, it is not clear whether he is talking about himself, or someone else. In Mark, Jesus refers to the son of man on 15 occasions,¹⁴ but the term appears to refer to several different things. What sort of being the son of man is,

13. See Weeden 1971, chapter 2, especially 65-68.

14. Mark 2.10, 2.28, 3.28, 8.31, 8.38, 9.9, 9.12, 9.31, 10.33, 10.45, 13.26, 14.21 (twice), 14.41, and 14.62.

whether he is the messiah, and whether either the son of man or the messiah is Jesus, remains unclear throughout Mark.

When the high priest asks Jesus, 'Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?' Jesus's answer to him again invokes the 'son of man': 'I am he, and you will see the son of man sitting on the right of the power and coming with the clouds of the sky' (Mk. 14.61-62). Is the phrase, 'I am he', an affirmation of mythic identity with God (as the priest seems to think), or is it merely a sort of copula, juxtaposing messianic affirmation with 'son of man' language? Does this terse dialogue clear things up about who Jesus is, or does it rather continue the confusion regarding his identity? The juxtaposition of the priest's question and Jesus's answer appears to create a paradoxical equation, namely, Christ = son of man. Who is this son of man, and what is his relation to the Christ? In the parallels to the story of Jesus's 'trial' before the council in Matthew and Luke, Jesus is equivocal in his response to the priest; in these cases, however, he can afford to be, because these gospels have already explicitly identified Jesus as messiah. Mark has not.

Furthermore, in the 'apocalyptic discourse' of Mark 13, Jesus says, 'many will come in my name, saying: I am he', and 'if someone says to you: See, here is the Christ; see, he is there, do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will rise up, and they will present signs and portents to mislead the chosen' (13.6, 21-22). Jesus himself appears to fulfill these prophecies in his answer to the high priest. Is he a false Christ? In the gospel of Mark, is Jesus saying (to Peter, disciples, high priest, and of course reader), 'yes, I really am the messiah, God's son', or is he saying instead that 'these are just not the right words'?

The gospel of Mark remains ambiguous about Jesus's identity. If Mark is read through the lens of Lois & Clark, however, Jesus is not a supernatural being hiding his true identity. Nor is he the messiah king of Israel. Like Clark Kent, the Jesus of the gospel of Mark is trying, unsuccessfully, to reveal who he is. Like Clark, Jesus must play out a fictitious role (in his case that of 'messiah'), not because he wants to, but because of the demands of those who are around him. Nor is Jesus simply an ordinary human being, any more than Clark Kent is. Like Clark, Jesus does not "fit" well into the human world; he is alien. However, humanity is not merely a pretense for either Jesus or Clark; humanity is profoundly, and paradoxically, tied up with who each of them is. For both Jesus and Clark, humanity is the object of desire.

In some ways, Mark questions the identity of Jesus far more radically than Lois & Clark questions that of Clark Kent, because the nature and origin of Jesus remain unclear in the gospel of Mark. Despite its revision of the tradition, Lois & Clark rests on the affirmation that Clark really is a strange being from another planet. Much as he might like to be, Clark is not 'really' human. However, in Mark, the reader does not know where Jesus came from (unless 'Nazareth in Galilee' [Mk. 1.9] is somehow equivalent to Krypton), nor does Jesus possess anything like the holographic projector which provides parental confirmation of Superman's origin. Instead, Jesus is identified as the 'son of Mary' (Mk. 6.3). A voice from the sky speaks on two occasions (1.11, 9.7) and confirms that Jesus is 'my son'. However, Mark does not say whose voice this is. The conventional reading takes the voice to be God. But should it? How could an anonymous voice, even one from the sky, resolve Jesus's identity?

Jesus's status as 'son of God' remains unclear in the gospel of Mark. It is also unclear

who or what the 'son of man' is--is he human or divine?--and whether or not Jesus is the son of man himself, or merely one who teaches about the son of man. Jesus talks about the son of man in Mark, but he never actually says, 'I am the son of man'. However, if the son of man is in some way Jesus's alter ego in Mark, as Superman is Clark Kent's alter ego in Lois & Clark, there nevertheless remain important differences between the gospel of Mark and Lois & Clark, and between Jesus and Clark Kent.

The son of man never appears as a character in Mark's story, except in the words and, implicitly, the deeds of Jesus. The betrayal, suffering, and death that Jesus foretells for the son of man happen to Jesus himself. At the transfiguration (Mk. 9.2-8), does Jesus rip open his ordinary clothes and reveal a gleaming white son of man suit underneath? If so, this behavior is quite unlike that of Clark Kent, who never disrobes with others about. In any case, the disciples remain confused and ignorant. When Jesus is transfigured, the disciples are terrified and understand nothing, as is usually the case in Mark. Are Jesus's disciples, like the people of Metropolis, so blinded by the monomyth that they cannot recognize their hero as a human being?

Furthermore, Jesus does not have the rapport with his family that Clark has with Ma and Pa Kent. Instead, Jesus's family regards him as insane (Mk. 3.21, 31-32), and he in turn does not privilege them in any way (3.33-34). In this regard the gospel of Mark's Jesus does seem more like the alienated, anti-social hero of the American monomyth--but rather more like Batman¹⁵ or Spiderman than Superman. Jesus's super-powers are also less reliable in Mark than are Superman's in Lois & Clark. Superman can of course be weakened by Kryptonite, and in one

15. See Blackmore 1991: 39, 46, 53.

episode he suffers amnesia and temporarily forgets how to perform super-deeds. In another episode, he is hypnotized and subjected to post-hypnotic suggestion; he is also susceptible to mind-altering chemicals. However, Jesus has to try twice to cure a blind man (Mk. 8.22-26), and on other occasions he cannot control the release of his super-powers (5.25-30, 6:56). At yet other times it is not clear whether Jesus has done anything super at all (5.39-43, 7.24-30).

Perhaps the most important difference between the two stories is that Mark offers no narrative equivalent to Lois Lane. There are important female characters in the gospel of Mark, such as Herodias and the Syrophoenician woman, and especially the women disciples who visit the tomb and then flee after meeting the strange young man at the story's end. However, Lois plays a crucial role in the Superman tradition, and even more so in Lois & Clark, where the priority of her name in the title signifies an active and dominant character--perhaps even more powerful in her effect on the narrative than Clark and Superman together. Lois is the point in the romantic triangle that most forcefully determines the story, and she is the crux of Clark's identity dilemma. Even after Lois has recognized that Superman is Clark, she is continually tempted to think of Clark and Superman as two distinct beings. For her, and for the viewing audience, the task of recognizing Clark returns again with each new episode. Otherwise the narrative tension would be destroyed and the story would come to an end. Lois represents the monomythic dream, and she is in that respect an even greater enemy to Superman than is Lex Luthor. This becomes especially clear in the episodes from the show's third season, when Lois falls in love with Clark and discovers the truth about his identity as Superman, and the fourth season, when they are married.

There is no one character in the gospel of Mark to whom Jesus struggles to reveal himself, as Clark Kent struggles to reveal himself to Lois Lane. Some may consider that Simon Peter plays a role in Mark's story that is analogous to the one that Lois plays in Lois & Clark. The scenes at Caesarea Philippi (Mk. 8) and in the high priest's courtyard (Mk. 14), discussed above, might be evidence for this. Like Lois, Peter has the monomyth dream (in his case, that Jesus is the Christ, Mk. 8.29-33), and he is given the opportunity to stand trial with the human Jesus or to reject him (14.66-72). Yet even though he is one of the more important disciples (along with James and John), Peter does not occupy the central position in the narrative of Mark that Lois Lane holds in Lois & Clark. Furthermore, insofar as Lois constantly (but unconsciously) tempts Clark to become Superman--this remains true even after she knows the truth about him--her analogue in Mark would be who- or whatever tempts Jesus to become the Christ. This is sometimes Satan's role (for example, Mk. 1.13, 3.22-27, 8.33, but contrast 15.29-32). Is Lois's analogue then Satan? However, Satan appears as a character only minimally in the gospel of Mark, although at 8.33, Jesus does refer to Peter as 'Satan'.

In Lois & Clark, it is Lois Lane who carries the burden of deciphering the truth about Clark. This remains true even after she has 'recognized' Clark, for even after Lois knows 'who he really is' she continues to learn what that means. Lois's failure to recognize the mighty Superman in the humble Clark Kent, and thus her failure to really know and love him, clarifies for the reader the profoundly human weakness of the Man of Steel. And when it finally comes, Lois's success in recognizing him only emphasizes Clark's human qualities all the more, for her recognition of him is itself fractured by his dual existence. It is Lois who uncovers and breaks

open the monomyth.¹⁶

The absence of any clear equivalent to Lois Lane in the gospel of Mark places this burden of recognition upon the reader. In Mark, the reader must recognize the ‘son of man’ in the human Jesus in order to understand (Mk. 13.14) and repent and believe (1.15). However, because there is nothing like Superman’s love triangle in Mark, there is no Galilean Lois Lane to help the reader understand the dilemma and the anguish of the revelation of Jesus.¹⁷ As a result, not only are the disciples constantly confused and uncertain about Jesus’s identity, but the reader is also. The great modern question of Jesus’s personality (his self, or ego) is entirely untouched by Mark. In particular, neither Mark nor the other gospels addresses Jesus’s sexuality, leaving a great blank page on which the modern reader writes as she will. In this respect (among others), Mark is definitely not modern literature.

Mark’s failure to fulfill the modern reader’s desire both produces the ‘messianic secret’, as an expression of the reader’s need to identify Jesus, and it simultaneously guarantees the secret’s failure. After all, if the ‘messianic secret’ reading of Mark is correct, this must be one of the worst-kept secrets of all time. Reading the gospel of Mark through the lens provided by Lois

16. When I presented parts of this essay at the 1995 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Stephen Moore suggested to me that something like this does happen in the non-canonical gospel of Mary. At the same time, Mikeal Parsons argued that the gospel of John makes the reader more aware of Jesus’s anguish.

17. Jesus’s ‘dream’ of Mary Magdalene, and Mary and Martha, performs something like this function in Nikos Kazantzakis’s The Last Temptation of Christ.

& Clark reveals the messianic secret to be the product of an intertext, a particular way of reading Mark's text. This secret is not 'in' the text of Mark. It is generated by the hermeneutic code that emerges from the juxtaposition of Mark with other texts. This is the contemporary reader's intertext--our rewriting of the gospel, in order to meet our need to understand who Jesus really is.

Like any written text, the gospel of Mark is helpless before the reader's desire for meaning. The messianic secret is the product of our desire to know who the important characters of the story 'really' are, regardless of whether those characters are Jesus the Nazarene or Clark Kent. The Superman stories derive much of their attraction for us from that desire. Perhaps that is also true for the gospel of Mark.

[T]he immobilizing metaphysics underlying this kind of conceptual plot is the direct, though not the desired, consequence of a total structural mechanism which seems to be the only one suited to communicate, through the themes discussed, a particular kind of teaching (Eco 1979: 124).

However, no one believes that Superman (or Clark Kent) is real. As the reading of Mark according to the messianic secret reveals, the gospel of Mark exposes itself as Lois & Clark does not to the dangers of the monomyth, dangers to which the other biblical gospels fully succumb through their more explicit identifications of Jesus as the Christ. Mark allows itself to be taken up by monomythic Christianity and inserted into the canonical frame provided by the Bible, where its subversions of Jesus's identity can go unnoticed. The alternative would be to refuse Mark its canonical position. It would be to read the gospel of Mark as a writerly text--that is, to see Mark as a deficient text, a castrated text, like 'Sarrasine'.

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