

## “BECOME TRANSFIGURED FOREVER”: Political Transcendence in Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta*

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**V** *for Vendetta* is a graphic novel written by Alan Moore and drawn mostly by David Lloyd, which first came out between 1982 and 1985 in *Warrior*, an anthology comic published by Quality Comics, and reprinted as an independent series by DC Comics in 1988. To define *V for Vendetta* as a “graphic novel” is to dissociate it from the mainstream superhero comic books, the likes of Superman or Batman. This is, I suppose, justified, as it has the look and feel of literature rather than that of a comic book about biceps and spandex. *V for Vendetta* is widely appreciated as one of the masterpieces of the medium of sequential art since its very beginning. Most historians agree that Alan Moore is one of the most influential writers in the history of comics: the person who “almost single-handedly raised the level of sophistication of mainstream comics, and his influence has been crucial in shifting the center of power in the industry from artists to writers.”<sup>1</sup> He is also the writer of other classic titles such as *Watchmen*, *From Hell*, and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex* (San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books, 2007).

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The story told by *V for Vendetta* is of a late 1990s Britain in a world mostly destroyed in a nuclear war. Britain is a dystopia suffering from the aftermath of World War III and overtaken by a totalitarian regime driven by an openly fascist ideology. The main character of the story is “V”: a survivor of one of the governments concentration camps, who hides his identity behind a Guy Fawkes mask, black hat and cape, and begins an elaborate, theatrical, and violent campaign of subversion against the powers that be. The other main character in the story is Evey Hammond: a 16-year old girl whom V saves from a squad of “police” officers about to rape and kill her for attempted prostitution. This event is actually where the story begins.

*V for Vendetta* is a disturbing text. It is that because it puts its reader behind a “hero” who becomes a law unto himself, kills people working for the government, and destroys public property. His motivation is, it seems, vengeance delivered in person on everyone responsible for his torment and disfiguration at the concentration camp. Furthermore: *V for Vendetta* is a paradoxical text. It is that because it *also* seems that the ultimate *telos* of V’s “vendetta” is not only personal retribution, but undermining the foundation of a political order that, by becoming a law unto itself, overruled the ultimate principle of human dignity—a norm which V himself violates often enough when dealing with his enemies, some of them more or less ordinary people merely doing their job, albeit in what can be described as exceptionally turbulent times. This is the paradox: *V destroys people with the government, because he believes government should not destroy its people*. You could say that the reader is led to identify with someone they know absolutely nothing about apart from that he certainly qualifies as a “terrorist” and who, while being obviously highly intelligent and a knowledgeable person, could also be quite mad. Reading the novel from the beginning to end does little to redeem the reader from these shadows and doubts.

What I intend to do in this article is *not*, in the first instance, understand and explain what Moore and Lloyd wanted to say with the novel, what was its political context or message it attempted to convey within that context. Moore has already told us, in brief, that “[i]t was about fascism, it was about anarchy, it

was about England."<sup>2</sup> It is, however, more than what Moore himself may think and talk about. We have seen the ever smiling Guy Fawkes mask worn by V in many different political events over the last couple of years. The mask has been sold at many sites at the so-called "#occupy"-protests staged across the world's cities. It has also become to symbolise "the Anonymous": a movement, network, or ideology of "hacktivists" which has, over the last couple of years, waged a global cyberwar against various opponents, from the United States' Department of Justice to the Church of Scientology. As far from the dystopia imagined by Moore and drawn by Lloyd these events may seem, it does also seem they share a political ethos of some kind.

What I attempt to do in this article is read *V for Vendetta* as something more than an account of fascism, anarchy, and England in the 1980s. Given the examples mentioned above, withstanding the concerns and paradoxes, there is *something* in the novel that addresses our contemporary political condition. This is, generally, what good literature does: transcends the context in which it was conceived, taps into something that is not anchored down in time and a place, something that floats on the surface and will pop up even if there were people who would rather see it sink beneath the tides of history. My attempt to explicate this something begins by isolating it in terms of *political experience*. This article is an exercise in hermeneutical phenomenology,<sup>3</sup> which has

more than a negative goal of overcoming obstacles in the way of regaining the original intention of the author. It must also allow for the more productive critique of a work whereby the particular intentions of the author can be refined, either by uncovering what fundamentally underlies them or going beyond them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> MTV.com. "Alan Moore: The Last Angry Man," 2007. Available at [http://www.mtv.com/shared/movies/interviews/m/moore\\_alan\\_060315/](http://www.mtv.com/shared/movies/interviews/m/moore_alan_060315/). Retrieved 23.9.2011.

<sup>3</sup> Clark E. Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 8-11.

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Makkreel, *Dilthey, Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 267.

In a case like *V for Vendetta*, a political (graphic) novel the politics of which becomes abducted, time and again, into entirely different contexts, we can reflect it as conscious experience taking place outside the novel itself—as “events” in the “real world”. Maggie Gray explains that *V*’s political struggle does not conclude in the book itself, but rather it opens “out to the reader to imagine what happens, as active agents themselves, and implies a resolution external to the comic”<sup>5</sup>. Some of this or something like this is, I understand, ongoing in the parks and squares in cities across the world, in the name of the Anonymous, as well as below the surface of the Internet, in the “deep web”.

I will begin my explication of *V*’s politics by a phenomenological reduction of what makes it *political* to begin with. This is an important step that must be taken early on, because it structures the analysis that follows. I will begin by denying the political of any material substance: it transcends the merely natural or physical views of the world insofar as what is political “in itself” can only be ascertained through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates. The spatiotemporal world is secondary to the primary being of consciousness. In the words of the founding father of contemporary phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, the “psychophysical universe of Nature” is put “out of action”: left out of consideration<sup>6</sup>. What this means is bracketing the existence of the “real world” as such and, for the current task, the “political world” in particular. Having done this,

[w]ith the whole physical and psychical world, the actual existence of the real relation between perceiving and perceived is excluded; and, nonetheless, a relation between perceiving and perceived (as well as between liking and liked) remains left over, a relation which becomes given essentially in “pure immanence,” namely purely on the ground of the phenomenologically reduced mental processes of perceiving and liking precisely as they fit into

<sup>5</sup> Maggie Gray, “‘A fistful of dead roses...’. Comics as Cultural Resistance: Alan Moore and Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta*,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 1 (2010): 31-49, here at 43.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 112-3.

the transcendental stream of mental processes. Precisely this situation, the purely phenomenological one, will occupy us now.<sup>7</sup>

The entry to V's political world is through transcendental experience, the remaining "*phenomenological residuum*"<sup>8</sup> after all contingencies have been put out of action. The purpose of bracketing, "parenthesizing" positings like the political in this manner is that "[i]nstead of living *in* them, instead of affecting *them*, we effect acts of *reflection* directed to them, and we seize upon them themselves as the *absolute* being which they are."<sup>9</sup>

So: what is the "absolute being" of political experience? Some scholars have attempted a phenomenological reduction of the political and I will now briefly recapitulate two of these that will guide me in reading *V for Vendetta*. Kari Palonen's attempt is a phenomenological reduction of *politics* rather than the political, but in his paper the former is explicitly based on the latter. For Palonen the experience of politics is "constituted by the actor's *experience of being in the situation of 'acting-against.'*"<sup>10</sup> By way of putting out of action the co-operative aspect of politics—which is of course often present in political "reality," but not *necessary* to the absolute being of politics—Palonen locates the foundation of the experience of the political on the "conflict aspect" of human action. This definition comes with two corollaries: it "needs both another subject as an *adversary* and another policy *resisting* intentionally the policy of the first subject."<sup>11</sup> Understood in these terms what is absolute in political experience is (§1) *resistance*—potential or actual—against someone or something.

<sup>7</sup> Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 215.

<sup>8</sup> Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 113, emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 114, emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup> Kari Palonen, "Politics as a Dramatic Action Situation" in *Exploring the Basis of Politics: Five Essays on the Politics of Experience, Language, Knowledge, and History*, eds. Ilkka Heiskanen and Sakari Hänninen (Helsinki: The Finnish Political Science Association), pp. 13-34, 16-7, emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> Palonen, "Politics as a Dramatic Action Situation," 18, emphasis in original.

In her close reading of Husserl, Natalie Depraz attempts to bracket the experience of the political by “freeing its content” from the use of power and linking it in “the most eminent phenomenological sense” with (§2) *authority*.<sup>12</sup> Her reduction of the political is a “co-performed” act that establishes a universal transcendental community.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of the “co-reduced” political community thus established aims at deprivation of power—understood in terms of domination: “the desire for ruling”<sup>14</sup>—and full recognition of the phenomenological ethics of powerlessness: “[t]he guardian of authority is, thus, originally passive, but his passivity is not opposed to activity any longer, it rather leads to the only true action, which is a spiritual one.”<sup>15</sup> Spiritual authority need not be religious, but it often is, especially in the occidental context. “For this reason,” writes Depraz, “one will not be astonished to come across occurrences—though unusual—mentioning Christ as a guardian of that powerless authority ruled by Passion.”<sup>16</sup> What results from Depraz’s phenomenological reduction is “an urgent distinction” between politics understood in terms of the classic Greek suffixes of *-kratos* and *-arche*: “[s]hould a phenomenological politics come into light, it could only be an archontic one, its most eminent efficiency being its passivity.”<sup>17</sup> I will come back to this distinction and the suffixes in the concluding section of the article.

Any truncated synopsis of the story told by *V for Vendetta* would not really do it justice—much like the 2006 film by the same name disowned by Moore. Having said that it is a story of a *plot*: a plot of a personal retribution, which transforms into a social revolution; a story of the emancipation of human being from the authority of an oppressive political institution; a story of a fall and restitution. The argument I will make in this article is that *V*’s political

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<sup>12</sup> Natalie Depraz, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Political,” *Husserl Studies* 12 (1995): 1-17, here at 4.

<sup>13</sup> Depraz, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Political,” 10.

<sup>14</sup> Depraz, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Political,” 3.

<sup>15</sup> Depraz, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Political,” 11.

<sup>16</sup> Depraz, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Political,” 12.

<sup>17</sup> Depraz, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Political,” 12.

subversion is a defence of human dignity ontologically grounded in transcendence. What *I* see in *V* for *Vendetta* is, simply put, a twentieth century classic in Christian anarchism. I will begin by setting up the context of the novel in the next section, then bracket the residuums of (§1) resistance and (§2) authority, as they are articulated in *V* for *Vendetta*, in the sections that follow.

### "ENGLAND PREVAILS!"

The political setting of the novel is the state of Britain taken over by a fascist regime. How did this, seemingly unlikely state of affairs, come to be? The story is narrated by Evey as she tells *V* memories of her childhood.<sup>18</sup> Labour comes into power in the 1980s and declares neutrality in the Cold War by getting rid of American missiles on British soil. Then came "the War" in which Britain was spared of direct bombing, but could not escape the indirect effects of thermonuclear war. Degradation of the global environment led to famine, sickness, and gradual dismantling of social order and its political institutions:

There were *riots*, and people with *guns*. Nobody knew what was going on. Everyone was waiting for the government to *do* something. But there *wasn't* any government anymore. Just lots of little gangs, all trying to *take over*. And then in 1992, somebody finally did...<sup>19</sup>

This is when the right-wing groups got together with the surviving corporations, began a movement calling itself "Norsefire," marched into London, and got things "under control." Thus began the era of explicitly fascist, *totalitarian* Britain. I am well aware that there is some controversy over the concept of totalitarianism, being a term of political discourse of a bygone era, *et cetera*, but I

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<sup>18</sup> *V*, 26-8. Henceforth all the citations of *V* are references to the Titan Books trade paperback edition, see Alan Moore, David Lloyd, Steve Whitaker, Siobhan Dodds, Jeannie O'Connor, Steve Craddock, Elitta Fell, and Tony Weare, *V for Vendetta* (New York: Vertigo/DC Comics, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> *V*, 28, emphasis in original. Henceforth all emphases on quotations of *V for Vendetta* are in the original text.

do find it descriptive in this instance.<sup>20</sup> I have let *The Great Lie*, a recent anthology on the topic edited by F. Flagg Taylor IV,<sup>21</sup> encourage me to stick with the concept. Put it this way: totalitarianism is a conceptual marker to remind us, lest we forget, of historical events like the holocaust and the gulag. But there is something urgently important we must understand: totalitarianism is not only a chapter in the history of ideas. It is, as Vaclav Havel writes, a persistent reminder to the contemporary civilisation: “a convex mirror of the inevitable consequences of rationalism, a grotesquely magnified image of its own deep tendencies, an extreme offshoot of its own development and an ominous product of its own expansion.”<sup>22</sup>

The totalitarian Britain Moore and Lloyd imagine is a richly symbolised body politic: something of the like pictured on the classic frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Its features are immediately familiar: its “Face” is that of London and its “Head” located on Downing Street; on this head there is “The Eye,” which tirelessly gazes down on its subjects through a centralised system of cameras installed throughout the dominion and “The Ears” listening to them conversing on telephone; The Scotland Yard-cum-state police represents “The Nose”; and “The Mouth” broadcasts propaganda from the BT Tower. Inside the head of this corporeal metaphor sits Leader, Adam Susan, the chairman of Norsefire Party, the “Führer” of fascist Britain. Susan’s leadership is limited by his idolatrous obsession with Fate: the government’s central computer. What Fate is exactly remains something of a mystery. Leader Susan worships it as God.

Technology is key for the political form of totalitarianism and makes it a distinctly modern phenomenon. Human will to power has always been there and found variable political forms to exercise tyranny, but over the last hundred years we have seen the innovation of the technological means—the “iron band,”

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<sup>20</sup> The back cover of *V for Vendetta* describes itself as “[a] frightening and powerful tale of the loss of freedom and identity in a chillingly believable totalitarian world.”

<sup>21</sup> F. Flagg Taylor IV, ed., *The Great Lie: Classic and Recent Appraisals of Ideology and Totalitarianism* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Vaclav Havel, “Politics and Conscience”. In Taylor, ed., *The Great Lie* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011) pp. 290-308, 299.

as Hannah Arendt illustrates, that "presses masses of isolated men together *and* supports them in a world which has become wilderness for them"<sup>23</sup>—required by the *totalitarian* form of domination. In his landmark *Democracy and Totalitarianism* Raymond Aron writes that at the very root of totalitarian domination "there is a politicization, an ideological transfiguration of all the possible crimes of individuals and in the end police and ideological terrorism."<sup>24</sup> Dissecting this "totalitarian transfiguration" is where Arendt's *Totalitarianism* excels. The hard core of totalitarian ideology is the "firm and sincere belief in human omnipotence": that everything is permitted, everything is possible.<sup>25</sup> Totalitarianism is not only an attempt to transmutate society, but to transform human nature itself, and "[t]he concentration camps are the laboratories where [these] changes are tested."<sup>26</sup> What these experiments will always prove is that human beings cannot be changed, but they can be destroyed. This moral cynicism, deriving from the firm and sincere belief that everything is permitted, totalitarian regimes will also discover—though they may be oblivious to this themselves—that "there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive."<sup>27</sup> Arendt calls these crimes of *radical evil*, which emerge

in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluosity as much as in that of all others, and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born.<sup>28</sup>

This is how totalitarianism *transfigures* human nature: it reduces the human being "to a bundle of reactions [which] separates him as radically as mental

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<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, CA: Harvest, 1985), 171, emphasis in original.

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 193-4.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 157.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 157.

disease from everything within him that is personality or character.”<sup>29</sup> Let us keep *transfiguration* in your mind: I will come back to it later on. There is a reason I put in the title of this paper.

If we think about political power and social relations in this imagined community, fascist Britain, we realise something quite obvious, a fact we could go back and check from the pages of political history since the beginning of time, which is that the question *how* did Britain become fascist—or more importantly: *how all political forms of community, states imagined as well as the “real” ones, come to ascertain their authority in the first place*—is one of no practical consequence whatsoever. It just does not matter. Why does it not matter? Because the social world is a world of rules, not a world of origins. Jacques Lefort explains in his *The Political Forms of Modern Society* how rules “split off” from the site they were politically conceived and “spread out” as they become the administrative apparatus used to control life in the body politic. Rules symbolise a position of authority—the distance between the dominator and the dominated—while, at the same time they are imposed, their historicity remains concealed. In other words: even though rules are always contingent, this contingency never appears when rules are applied to prohibit some things and prescribe others. According to Lefort revealing this contingency would amount to subversion by “making apparent the instability of an order that it is intended to raise to the status of essence.”<sup>30</sup> The “possessor of the knowledge of the rule,” i.e. the political subject, “embodies an authority which does not have to account for itself or, as they say, for divine right.”<sup>31</sup> Discourse of power is constructed in such a way that the multiplicity of all its rules cannot be structured or unified around a single principle or guarantee: “[t]he answer to the question of origin governs its development, but it transforms itself, displaces itself within its limits; and this is the cost at which power is exercised in actual social relations.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 139.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 213.

<sup>31</sup> Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, 212-13.

<sup>32</sup> Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, 214.

Let us think this through with an example from V's Fascist Britain. Below the Head of its body politic works "The Finger": the government's secret police force and its notorious "fingermen." These are the kind of men who execute the will of the government by patrolling the streets and holding a prerogative to kill offenders of law—this is exactly what they were about to do in the beginning of the story: when they catch Evey in the act of attempted prostitution. As she pleads it was her first time and that she would do anything the police wanted to, the Vice Detail replies: "You've got it *wrong*, miss. You'll do anything we want and *then* we kill you."<sup>33</sup> The fingermen are in a position to employ a discourse of power to go about their wicked ways upon Evey—they even read her the rules as they are about to do so: "You know the laws on *prostitution*," the Vice Detail recites, "That's a *class-H* offence. That means we get to decide what happens to you."<sup>34</sup> To come back to the question asked in the previous paragraph: how did a government that made such a law on prostitution come to be is not relevant—the fingermen have their prerogative and they are willing to use it for purposes of evil.

### RETRIBUTION AND (§I) RESISTANCE

V, the protagonist of the novel, first appears when he saves Evey's life and, while so doing, takes three fingermen's who caught her in the act of prostitution. Then he severely disables Lewis Prothero, the official propagandist working for the Mouth and the former head of the Larkhill "resettlement" camp. Now The Nose begins to look into his case—opens a file on a "terrorist by the codename V"—and soon find out that over the past four years he has killed everyone who ever worked at Larkhill, where was held prisoner and subjected to medical experiments. As signature of his work V leaves a rose on his victims and tags the location with a circled V: a Roman numeral that stands for the fifth room in the

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<sup>33</sup> V, 11.

<sup>34</sup> V, 11.

Larkhill's medical block—this is where V was held and experiments on him made. After his dramatic escape from the camp, between the years 1993 and 1997, V had taken the lives of over forty people. The killing of Bishop Anthony Lilliman and Doctor Delia Surridge—the former served as priest and the latter as pathologist at Larkhill—along with a number of bodyguards and police set to watch over them completes V's Vendetta against his Larkhill tormentors.

What we can establish by now is that “codename V” is no saint. Eric Finch, the chief of the Nose—I will come back to him below—dreads his attitude to killing: he kills “ruthlessly, efficiently, and with a minimum of fuss”; slaughters human beings “like cattle”;<sup>35</sup> which is “monstrous” and “pure bloody evil.”<sup>36</sup> But surely there are mitigating circumstances: all people employed at the camp were actively working towards the extermination of the detained—the “*black people* and the *pakistanis*,” “*radicals* [and] the homosexuals,” all who had been “taken away”<sup>37</sup> as Evey recalls—which achieves, if it does not exceed, a purity of bloody evil that is V's retributive justice. Reading the book one cannot but side with V, the lone survivor of the Larkhill hell, or *against the fascists* at the minimum.

Well: how about V then? Does he have anything to say in his defence? When Evey asks him who he is, he replies: “I'm the King of the Twentieth Century. I'm the Bogeyman. The Villain. The Black Sheep of the Family.”<sup>38</sup> When he confronts Bishop Lilliman he presents himself as the Devil, even exhibiting a pair of small horns.<sup>39</sup> To be honest: V does not really seem like a great moral teacher. Perhaps he has some other role, or roles, to play. We will discuss these in a bit.

But first we have to make something clear. It does not make it right, though, killing all those people: revenge is not right, no, but to kill another human being

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<sup>35</sup> V, 24.

<sup>36</sup> V, 72.

<sup>37</sup> V, 28.

<sup>38</sup> V, 13.

<sup>39</sup> V says to the bishop: “Please allow me to introduce myself [...] I am a man of wealth and taste,” which is a refrain in The Rolling Stones' 1968 song Sympathy for the Devil (V, 54). When the bishop asks V “Who are you really?,” he replies: “I am the devil, and I come to do the devil's work” (V, 55). This is actually a misquote of Charles Manson, the serial killer.

is an *Evil*. This is the premise where we must begin to think about our orientation towards V's actions, and indeed *the social rules concerning violence in general*. If there are moral absolutes, timeless and universal axioms in ethics, whether they are such because they be divine revelations recorded in scripture or reflected by our conscience, the principle "[t]hou shalt not kill"<sup>40</sup> another human being is certainly a candidate. A reading of Genesis reveals that transgression of this principle was a sin even before it was chiselled on stone.<sup>41</sup> Taken literally—or in the Sadducean sense, if you like—this principle is, it needs to be said, somewhat problematic. Like John Howard Yoder points out, one of them is that it is prone to "collision" with other moral absolutes: "[s]ituations can easily be imagined, or documented from history, in which it is evidently necessary to choose between not lying and not taking life or between not taking one life and not defending another."<sup>42</sup> Morality is absolute in principle, but can be a relative praxis. This leads to some tricky ethical questions: When is threat or actual use of physical force against another human being sanctioned? In which circumstances is taking life permitted? There may, of course, be contingent legal answers to these questions, but in this particular case they fail for two reasons. They fail, because the road to totalitarian domination begins, writes Arendt, in the murder of the juridical person of man "by putting certain categories of people outside the protection of the law" and "by placing the camp outside the normal penal system, and by selecting its inmates outside the normal judicial procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty."<sup>43</sup> They fail also, because the sovereign Leader, who decides when the rules are applied,<sup>44</sup> is so obviously implied in the moral quandaries of his own rule. Swallowed whole,

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<sup>40</sup> Ex. 20:13. Henceforth all the references to scripture are to the King James translation.

<sup>41</sup> See also 1 John 3:11-3.

<sup>42</sup> John H. Yoder, *Nevertheless: Varieties of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971), 31.

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 145.

<sup>44</sup> I am referring to Carl Schmitt's (in)famous definition of sovereignty as the one "who decides on the exception." See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

so to speak, legal positivism is just as useful an instrument to totalitarian regimes as it is to liberal democracies.<sup>45</sup>

But V holds more grudges than the one against Larkhill. He is not out to settle a personal score only, but to accomplish more than that: something profoundly political. Settling the personal score is a mere prelude to a political counter-revolution, purging Britain of fascism. Before we move on to discuss his political vision, we must talk about the role(s) V plays, what system of values does he represent?

He is very vague about himself. Apart from identifying himself as the king of the twentieth century and bogeyman, the villain and the black sheep, V tells little about himself or about anything else for that matter, which annoys Evey to no end.<sup>46</sup> Most of his lines are quotes from literature or popular culture, ranging from the Holy Bible to The Rolling Stones. A lot is revealed more indirectly in a discussion between V and Evey in an episode in book 1, chapter 5.<sup>47</sup> The discussion begins with V and Evey walking down the staircase of the Shadow Gallery—this is V’s home, his “Batcave” if you like—and Evey noticing an inscription of “V.V.V.V.V.” on the arch of the big hall. She then asks V what it stands for. *Vi veri veniversum vivus vici*—“by the power of truth, I, while living, have conquered the universe”—is a quotation in Latin coined by the influential English occult religionist and social critic Aleister Crowley<sup>48</sup> (1875-1947). Having taught this Evey expresses her gratitude to V for saving her life and offers to help him, make some kind of a deal.<sup>49</sup> Standing before and looking at a large painting

<sup>45</sup> See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 4.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. V, 223.

<sup>47</sup> V, 44.

<sup>48</sup> This is actually a misquote from the 27th Chapter, “The Cry of the 4th Aethyr.”

Which is Called PAZ,” of Crowley’s *The Vision and the Voice*. The original source reads “Vi, Veri, Universum Vivus Vici,” which is “the motto of the Seer as Magister Templi” (see footnote 13 at <http://hermetic.com/crowley/the-vision-and-the-voice/aethyr4.html>). It is conceivable that, given V’s fascination with the letter (and numeral) of “V,” V.V.V.V.V. is aesthetically superior to V.V.U.V.V., and was thereby preferred by Moore.

<sup>49</sup> V, 43.

hanging on the wall V accepts Evey's offer: "Yes, I think we can make a deal."<sup>50</sup> Then Evey asks him who said V.V.V.V.V. in the first place to which V answers: "Nobody you'd have heard of. A German gentleman named Dr. John Faust. He made a deal too."<sup>51</sup>

There are two references to art we need to discuss next, because of their relevance to the story told by *V for Vendetta* and the political experience concealed therein. The story of Faust is widely known and there is no reason for me to delve deep into that. The legend has been reinterpreted a number of times ever since, most notably by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the early 19th century. Goethe's Faust draws upon Christian symbolism, but despises the church. His Mephistopheles, "one of the most influential literary creations of all time,"<sup>52</sup> is a very complex and diverse figure—not at all unlike V. Jeffrey Burton Russell writes that Goethe's

Mephisto appears both as the opponent of God and as the instrument of the divine will; as the creator of the material world and as God's subject; as the principle of matter against the principle of spirit; as evil against good; as chaos against order; as a stimulus to creativity; and in many other aspects. He is fundamentally a nature spirit representing the undifferentiated world as it presents itself to human experience. He is an invitation to the reader to face the multiplicity of reality.<sup>53</sup>

This also sums up many of the roles played by V: the Mephistopheles of *V for Vendetta*.

Second reference is the painting: a rendition of *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, the original of which was completed in 1475 by the brothers Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo and exhibited today at the National Gallery in London. Saint Sebastian was "a man of great faith, a good Christian man" who, *The*

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<sup>50</sup> V, 44.

<sup>51</sup> V, 44.

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: the Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 157.

<sup>53</sup> Russell, *Mephistopheles*, 158.

*Golden Legend* tells us, was martyred in the year 287 by the Roman emperor Diocletian, during his early persecution of Christians. While serving the Roman emperor as soldier, Sebastian converted many into the Christian faith and performed some miracles. Upon learning this Diocletian, “a worshipper of idols,” commanded him to be executed for being “Christian privily against my health, and in despite of our gods.”<sup>54</sup> Bound to a stake on a field “the archers shot at him till he was as full of arrows as an urchin [hedgehog] is full of pricks, and thus left him there for dead.”<sup>55</sup> But, the legend continues, Sebastian did *not* die on the stake that day, but was miraculously healed by a Christian woman “till he was all whole,” and made of himself a living testimony to the truth of Christianity. Against the advice of his brethren he then showed his “resurrected” body to Diocletian. This got him in the palace prison and ended up in him being stoned to death. Sebastian is venerated by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches as the patron saint of soldiers and enemies of religion, and commonly depicted tied to tree and pierced with arrows, as he is in the painting hanging on the wall of the Shadow Gallery. Comparing the story of Edmund the Martyr, a ninth century king of East Anglia, with Saint Sebastian in his *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors* John Edward Damon writes, that

[L]ike Edmund, Sebastian held high social status before his martyrdom, was renowned as a soldier but did not fight to save himself, desired to use his exalted position to help those beneath him and refused to use his high status to escape death.<sup>56</sup>

V is, too, a king—that of “the Twentieth Century”—and a warrior, who fought and died holding onto his principles.

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Halsall, “23// Of St. Sebastian” in *The Golden Legend or Lives Of The Saints*, Available at: <http://www.aug.edu/augusta/iconography/goldenLegend/sebastian.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Halsall, “23// Of St. Sebastian.”

<sup>56</sup> John Edward Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), 187.

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(§2) *AUTHORITY AND ARCHÈ*

V's acts of terror take a political turn in chapter four when he infiltrates the state's television channel and interrupts an ideological feature film to broadcast a videoed message, in which he basically addresses the human condition, or at least as it is contingently exhibit in English society.<sup>57</sup> Sitting in front of the camera, V begins:

I suppose you're wondering why I've called you here this evening. Well, you see, I'm not entirely satisfied with your performance lately... I'm afraid your work has been slipping, and... and, well, I'm afraid we've been thinking about letting you go. Oh, I know, I know. You've been with the company a long time now. Almost... let me see. Almost ten thousand years! My word, doesn't time fly? It seems like only yesterday... I remember the day you commenced your employment, swinging down from the trees, fresh-faced and nervous, a bone clasped in your bristling fist... "Where do I start, Sir?" you asked, plaintively. I recall my exact words: "There's a pile of dinosaur eggs over there, youngster," I said, smiling paternally the while. "Get sucking."<sup>58</sup>

What is clear is that V's *ethos* is not his own: *he* was not there ten thousand years ago pointing *his* finger at dinosaur eggs—a thought that would raise more than a few historical and paleontological questions—but someone was: a figure *paternal* to humanity. What V is doing is talking on *His* behalf. V continues:

Well, we've certainly come a long way since then, haven't we? And yes, yes, you're right, in all that time you haven't missed a day. Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Also, please don't think I've forgotten about your outstanding service record, or about all the invaluable contributions you have made to the company... [...] But... well, to be frank, we've had our problems too. There's no getting away from it. Do you know what I think a lot of it stems from? I'll tell you... It's your basic unwillingness to *get*

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<sup>57</sup> V, 107-18.

<sup>58</sup> V, 113.

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*on* within the company. You don't seem to want to face up to any *real* responsibility, or to be your own boss.<sup>59</sup>

Here V's *pathos*, narrated in the mode of industrial manufacture, is to appeal to the transcendental potential within humanity to "take responsibility," be one's "own boss." I say *transcendental*, because V, speaking in the voice of the Father, presumes we have the abilities necessary for "promotion" above the duties on the "factory floor,"<sup>60</sup> but have thus far failed to apply. What does V mean by talking about the company, factory, promotion, and work? His is a *parable* about power in human community: a criticism of the way in which humanity, every single human being, lets itself be ruled *politically*. According to Depraz's phenomenological reduction of the political, a transcendental political being is someone who "practices reflexion at the very moment when he is acting,"<sup>61</sup> and, according to V, we are currently not practising reflexion of our political circumstance. We have become servants to the powers that be and let our "political being" down. And for this we cannot, V declares, blame the powers that be:

And it's no good blaming the drop in work standards upon bad management, either... Though, to be sure, the *management* is very bad. In fact, let us not mince words... the management is *terrible!* We've had a string of embezzlers, frauds, liars and lunatics making a string of catastrophic decisions. This is plain fact. But who elected them? It was *you!* *You* who appointed these people! *You* who gave them the power to make your decisions for you!<sup>62</sup>

V comes down heavy on his "children": he reminds them of the possibility of political transformation latent in their current, despicable condition. This is what makes V's address a political *parable*: not merely its literary form, but focusing our attention on something crucially important we might not see or, for some reason, might not want to look at. "The immediate aim of a parable," writes

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<sup>59</sup> V, 113-14.

<sup>60</sup> V, 115.

<sup>61</sup> Depraz, "Phenomenological Reduction and the Political," 11.

<sup>62</sup> V, 116.

Snodgrass, "is to be compellingly interesting, and in being interesting it diverts attention and disarms. A parable's ultimate aim is to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, *and* move to action."<sup>63</sup> And this is exactly where V leaves his television address:

I will, however, be generous. You will be granted two years to show me some improvement in your work. If at the end of that time you are still unwilling to make a go of it... You're fired. That will be all. You may return to your labours.<sup>64</sup>

For Jesus parables were instruments to convey messages from God the Father to His people. Like prophets before him, Jesus talked in parables to reveal something about the nature of God and to show what humanity is like and, not only that, what it should and may become. Jesus wanted to make people think about themselves and stimulate a response in their relation to God.<sup>65</sup> While the reader of the book does not know it yet, this chapter and episode—the address V had recorded and shows on television—marks the end of V's campaign of violence and the beginning of its "messianic" conclusion.

Before moving on to that a brief excursion to how V is finally caught up with. It is the job of Finch, the Minister of Investigations at The Nose, to figure out V and the rationale behind V's "terrorism." Finch is a senior investigator, an experienced professional and, unlike many of the fingermen patrolling the streets, has moral standards the likes one would expect from your average pipe-smoking, trench coat wearing Scotland Yard detective. He is outspokenly sceptical of the ideological aspects of the current regime, but his services provide more than enough merit for the Leader Susan to support him nevertheless.<sup>66</sup> Finch finally makes a breakthrough in his investigations when he travels to Larkhill and, in order to "think the way *he* thinks," meaning V of course, takes a large dose of

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<sup>63</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 8, emphasis in original.

<sup>64</sup> V, 117-8.

<sup>65</sup> Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 8-9.

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. V, 30.

LSD upon entering the now abandoned camp.<sup>67</sup> On his trip Finch wanders around the camp, becomes to express doubt and feel guilt about his entanglement with the totalitarian movement: “How did I get here, to this stinking place; my job; my life; my conscience; my prison...”?<sup>68</sup> At his point *V for Vendetta* reveals its *anagnonisis*: “a certain point near the end at which linear suspense is resolved and the unifying shape of the whole design becomes conceptually visible” as put by Northrop Frye, “a point of identification, where a hidden truth about something or somebody comes into view.”<sup>69</sup> What comes into view is the vision that answers all of Finch’s questions: “Who imprisoned me here? Who *keeps* me here? Who can *release* me? Who’s controlling and constraining my life, except... me?”<sup>70</sup> Then Finch runs away from the ruins of the camp, “vomiting up the values that victimized”<sup>71</sup> him, climbs up a hill, holding his hands up to the sky, and finds himself with the answer Thomas got when he asked Jesus, according to the gospel of St. John, “whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?": “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>72</sup>

At this pivotal moment Finch, like V five years before him, discovers his political being. Tearing himself bare naked, Finch climbs out of the darkness of his cratological political condition, from the official truth of totalitarianism, into the light of archontic political transcendence, the powerless authority of “the way, the truth, and the life.” The same was experienced by Evey after she was incarcerated and interrogated by the Finger—or that is at least what Evey thought, not knowing she is in fact safe with V in the Shadow Gallery, being acuminated out of *her* political condition.<sup>73</sup> Evey is forced to make a decision

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<sup>67</sup> V, 210.

<sup>68</sup> V, 215.

<sup>69</sup> Northrop Frye, 1963 *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 25-6.

<sup>70</sup> V, 215.

<sup>71</sup> V, 216.

<sup>72</sup> John 14:5-6. In *V for Vendetta* this fragment is quoted in French: “La voie... la vérité... la vie.”

<sup>73</sup> V, chs. 10-13.

between submitting to the powers that be, signing a false confession against V, or death by firing squad. By choosing death over submission—when “there’s nothing left to threaten with, is there?”<sup>74</sup>—Evey passes V’s trial of allegiance and the truth is revealed to her. Upon finding out she was in fact imprisoned, not by the Finger, but by her mentor, Evey’s initial reaction is of course confused anger. But V explains that this had to be done, because he loved Evey and wanted to set her free:

I didn’t put you in prison, Evey. I just showed you the bars. [...] You were born in a prison. You’ve been in a prison so long, you no longer believe there’s a world outside. [...] You were in a cell, Evey. They offered you a choice between death of your principles and the death of your body. [...] You said you’d rather die. You faced the fear of your own death, and you were calm and still. [...] The door of the cage is open, Evey. All that you feel is the wind from the outside. Don’t be afraid.<sup>75</sup>

Then V walks Evey, gripped by fear and trembling, into the elevator and on to the roof of the Shadow Gallery. In the storm and rain, standing high above the streets of London, Evey holds her hands up to the sky. She begins to describe her feelings: “V... everything’s so different... I... I feel so....”<sup>76</sup> But V already knows how she feels:

Five years ago I too came through a night like this, naked under a roaring sky. This night is yours. Seize it. Encircle it within your arms. Bury it into your heart up to the hilt... become transfixed... become transfigured... forever.<sup>77</sup>

The scene at the roof—Evey’s transfiguration—is depicted on a single page coloured monochrome. Its archetype is in the gospel accounts of Jesus leading

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<sup>74</sup> V, 162.

<sup>75</sup> V, 170-1.

<sup>76</sup> V, 172.

<sup>77</sup> V, 172.

some of his disciples to a high mountain (Tabor or Hermon, likely) to witness *his* transfiguration, *metemorphōthē*.<sup>78</sup>

And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them. And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them.<sup>79</sup>

The narrative of Jesus' transfiguration is to be read eschatologically. It is a revelation, to his closest disciples, the *archē* of the *Logos*—"For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us"<sup>80</sup>—and the coming of his suffering and death, but also the promise of *parousia*. To those who believe this tells that transfiguration—"we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory"<sup>81</sup>—begins already in this life. As it is lucidly explicated in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:

This is not mystical deification but a reattainment of the divine likeness. It does not take place by rituals but by the ministry of the Spirit. It is not for an elite few but for all Christians. It is not just a hope for the future [...] but begins already with the coming of the Spirit as a deposit. It carries with it an imperative [...]. Set in the new aeon, Christians must reshape their conduct in accordance with it. This takes place as their minds and wills are renewed by the Spirit. They are thus to become what they are.<sup>82</sup>

The imperative is a political one. As put by St. Paul: "[B]e not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove

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<sup>78</sup> See Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:1-13.

<sup>79</sup> Mark 9:2-3; cf. Matt. 17:2.

<sup>80</sup> 1 John 1:2.

<sup>81</sup> 2 Cor. 3:18.

<sup>82</sup> Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub Co., 1985), 609.

what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."<sup>83</sup> This is to say transfiguration is an act of intellectual renewal: declaration of freedom from the hierarchies of the world—"for the fashion of this world passeth away"<sup>84</sup>—and assuming the political being of the *archè*: the eternally pre-existent, "[t]hat which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life."<sup>85</sup>

After Evey's transfiguration—from the superfluosness of totalitarian reduction to the discovery of spiritual freedom of the *archè*—V tempts Evey, offering her a chance to avenge the death of her former lover by simply plucking a rose from the Shadow Gallery's garden: "To pick a flower is not a *large* thing. It is as easy as it is irrevocable. Understand what is being offered here, and do as thou wilt."<sup>86</sup> Evey, however, declines the offer: "Let it grow."<sup>87</sup> The scene suddenly cuts into the Leader Susan, who sits in his office looking at the monitors of Fate, which suddenly proclaim: I LOVE YOU. On these few pages of the *V for Vendetta* we find two narrative parallels with the gospel. The first is the story of the three temptations that took place soon after Jesus had been baptised detailed in the Gospels of Matthew,<sup>88</sup> Mark,<sup>89</sup> and Luke.<sup>90</sup> According to Luke the devil took Jesus on a mountain high and showed him "all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time" and said: "All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it."<sup>91</sup> Jesus

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<sup>83</sup> Rom. 12:2.

<sup>84</sup> 1 Cor. 7:31.

<sup>85</sup> Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary*, 81.

<sup>86</sup> V, 177.

<sup>87</sup> V, 177.

<sup>88</sup> Matt. 4:1-11.

<sup>89</sup> Mark 1:12-13.

<sup>90</sup> Luke 4:1-13.

<sup>91</sup> Luke 4:6. Jacques Ellul points out an extraordinary detail in this exegesis, which is that in neither Luke's or Matthew's (4:8-9) account of the temptation does Jesus contest the fact that political power—all "power" and "glory" in the "kingdoms of the world" — actually belongs to the devil. I.e.: Jesus does not dispute that political power has been given to the devil and he

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declines the offer: “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”<sup>92</sup> The second parallel is in the message delivered by V to Leader Susan via Fate: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you,” Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, that “ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”<sup>93</sup>

### CHRISTIAN ANARCHY?

What we have in *V for Vendetta* is evil, everywhere: the “radical evil” embodied by the fascist leviathan and the “pure bloody evil” enacted by V, taking revenge on the powers that be and undermining their totalitarian ideology. For anyone of pacifist persuasion this *irreducibility of evil* is a bitter pill to swallow. But one cannot get away from this by not reading *V for Vendetta*: we are not talking just about comics here, but of the human political condition. There is in the world such a thing as evil and overcoming it with good, while “honest in the sight of all men,”<sup>94</sup> will not always be good enough. This is a cause for considerable intellectual and existential unease.

V is unable to overcome it himself. Having “toppled empires” and “made a canvas clean of rubble,” he gives his life as sacrifice so that “creators can then build a better world.”<sup>95</sup> What he means by “better world” is somewhat vague, and such talk makes Evey initially very confused. As he lies dying of gunshot wounds inflicted on him by Eric Finch, V delivers his “heritage” to Evey:

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gives it to whom he wills, from which follows that those who hold political power receive it from him and depend upon him. See Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 58.

<sup>92</sup> Luke 4:10.

<sup>93</sup> Matt. 5:44-45

<sup>94</sup> Rom. 12:17.

<sup>95</sup> V, 222.

This country is not saved ... do not think that ... but all its old beliefs have become *rubble*, and from rubble may we *build* ... That is their task, to rule themselves; their lives and loves and land ... with this achieved, then let them talk of salvation. Without it, they are surely *carrion*.<sup>96</sup>

Soon thereafter Evey comes to realise her role in this history of salvation: after V's passing *she* must become the symbol he anonymously embodied; *she* must take upon herself to represent the ideas and principles behind the painted smile. After the authorities have declared "terrorist by the codename V" dead, Evey's V makes her first and final appearance—at least in the novel, that is—addressing London through the multitude of its public speakers:

Since mankind's dawn, a handful of oppressors have accepted the responsibility over our lives that we should have accepted for *ourselves*. By doing so, they took our power. By doing nothing, we gave it away. We've seen where their way leads, through camps and wars, towards the slaughterhouse.

In anarchy, there is another way. With anarchy, from rubble comes new life, hope reinstated. They say anarchy's dead, but see, reports of my death were ... exaggerated. Tomorrow, Downing Street will be destroyed, the Head reduced to ruins, an end to what has gone before. Tonight, you must choose what comes next. Lives of our own, or a return to chains. Choose *carefully*. And so, adieu.<sup>97</sup>

With this V, resurrected in Evey, does not take part in the new creation, the rule of lives and loves and land, but acts without expecting anything specific to result. According to Depraz, only such "acting-without-doing" can be said to be purely transcendental: "it remains free with regards to any effect."<sup>98</sup> What such a "transcendental detachment" accomplishes is the disarming the domination of *political power* and endowing the powerlessness of *spiritual* authority: "[t]he guardian of authority is [...] originally passive, but his passivity is not opposed to

<sup>96</sup> V, 245.

<sup>97</sup> V, 258.

<sup>98</sup> Depraz, "Phenomenological Reduction and the Political," 11.

activity any longer, it rather leads to the only true action, which is a spiritual one.”<sup>99</sup> As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians: “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.”<sup>100</sup> This is what Christ accomplished and in the shadow of His “protophenomenology” we stand.

If *I* had to put *V for Vendetta* in an ideological pigeonhole, it would be Christian anarchism. It is certainly anarchism, but the bit leaning on Christianity is much more subtle and often overlooked. I am not denying *V* systematically ignores a number of points raised in the Sermon on the Mount—the “manifesto of Christian anarchism.”<sup>101</sup> Neither am I denying that there is a certain anti-religious ethos in the book—*V* did attack *organised* religion by murdering Bishop Lilliman, who had ganged up with the powers that be and taken some very un-Christian liberties of his own—but, at the same time, not overestimating it either. Such political action may be warranted in certain cases, take Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s opposition of National Socialism for example, and is in itself not a blemish on Christianity, but something we have learned, over the history of human civilisation, to expect from one another.<sup>102</sup> The interesting question here is not theological, whether or not *V*’s ethos is in line with some religious tradition—is it Christian in particular or theist in general?—but of *metaethical* nature. Whence the moral foundation to stand one’s ground against, say, a totalitarian Britain—something Walter Wink would have no trouble at all identifying a *domination system*, a political order “characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations,

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<sup>99</sup> Depraz, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Political,” 11.

<sup>100</sup> Col. 2: 14-15.

<sup>101</sup> See Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos, *Christian anarchism: a political commentary on the Gospel* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010).

<sup>102</sup> See Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: a Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all"?<sup>103</sup>

I have to give it to James Leask, who put it into words blogging on C!TB on the news of Margaret Thatcher's passing:

In the wake of the film adaptation, the Guy Fawkes mask of its protagonist, V, has become an emblem for the Anonymous movement, which I believe misses the entire point of the book. **V For Vendetta** asks one central question, *is terrorism justified if it is for a noble cause*, and refuses to answer the question. Even if the thinly-veiled Thatcherite analogue is the villain of the book, that does not make V the hero. V takes on the identity of Britain's most famous terrorist, and then proceeds to do worse. He wins, but did he do good? He hurt a lot of people, ones who weren't just his opponents. He revelled in fire and blood.<sup>104</sup>

He certainly did and this is the root of all the intellectual and existential unease: not because *V for Vendetta* does not relieve its readers with an answer, but because this question goes unanswered while some of us are building real bombs and stabbing living people to death this very moment. If we go looking for metaethical grounds to take part in such activities—or to resist them—there is no-one in a position to give or deny permission on the horizontal plane, so to speak: humanity is matter that does not matter, and talk of a "better world" is meaningless without an absolute measure for what is good in the first place. Thus there is a certain irony in the fact that representations of V—the Guy Fawkes mask and his rallying cries—are employed by the Anonymous and other likeminded groups to attack religion or religious institutions. Given: it is one thing to resist the evil that men do in the name of religion, but another to categorically rule out transcendence. We can hand our freedom to the powers that be, of course, expect them to tell good apart from evil and wait for orders.

<sup>103</sup> Walter Wink, 1998 *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 39.

<sup>104</sup> James Leask, 2013 "Hello the Voice of Fate" *Comics! The Blog*. Available at: <http://comicstheblog.com/2013/04/19/hello-the-voice-of-fate/>. Bold and emphasis in original.

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But that would not be *getting on* with the company, would it? Why should we dedicate ourselves to the *management*, because their mores are subjective just like everyone else's, and they are likely "embezzlers, frauds, liars and lunatics" anyway?

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit argue in their *Idolatry* that human beings can not really help dedicating their lives to something, and one should think long and hard what or who is worthy of asking such a high price:

Absolute value can be conferred upon many things—institutions such as the state, persons, goals, ideologies, and even a football team. In this extension of worship, religious attitude is perceived not as part of a metaphysics or as an expression of customary rituals but as a form of absolute devotion, an attitude that makes something into a godlike being. What makes something into an absolute is that it is both overriding and demanding. It claims to stand superior to any competing claim, and unlike merely an overriding rule it is also something that provides a program and a cause, thereby demanding dedication and devotion.<sup>105</sup>

Anonymous occupation of parks and squares, attacking websites for "lulz" is mere protest, not an inch more. It leaves you with the same shadows and doubts you have after reading *V for Vendetta*: what *now*? If what we have now is not right and good, what is and—this is a very important question—*why*? Every inch towards answering this question is movement on the vertical plane, so to speak, and steps taken up are ones of absolute devotion.

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<sup>105</sup> Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit. 1992. *Idolatry* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 245-246.