

The Hero of the West

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From Achilles of the Trojan War to Schwartzkopf of the Gulf War, the West has long worshipped figures who embody the heroic impulse 'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield' as Tennyson put it. While other cultures tell myths of god-men whose journeys and exploits helped to fashion the world we know today, nowhere have they achieved the same prominence or longevity as in Greece and the West. As Eliade says:

Figures comparable to the Greek heroes are also found in other religions. But it is only in Greece that the religious structure of the hero received so perfect an expression; it is only in Greece that the heroes enjoyed a considerable religious prestige, nourished imagination and reflection, and inspired literary and artistic creativity.¹

Eliade's point is valid for European mythologies more broadly. Nowhere else does literature - saga, epic, tragedy, the modern novel, biography and autobiography - revolve to the same extent around the figure of an individual, usually male and often of godlike proportions, who is on a quest of some kind. This figure became so paradigmatic that since the late seventeenth century English dictionaries have given as a major definition of hero 'the most important male person in a story, play, poem, etc.' Europe exported its heroism along with beads and syphilis, so that one finds heroic literature in other languages, and even indigenous peoples have come to see their own lives in terms of heroic struggles against oppression.² Parallels and influences there may be in other cultures, but the hero remains a quintessentially Western mythic figure.

However, at the end of the twentieth century, weary of war and demagoguery, ashamed of the West's rape of nature, suspicious even of chivalry, our culture appears to be turning against the hero. 'Heroic' is now often a derogatory epithet, meaning grandiose, belligerent, impractical. 'The hero of the will... has been disappearing from drama and fiction, and political history, too',

¹ Mircea Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, Chicago, 1985, vol. 1, p. 289.

² See, e.g., James Miller, *Koori: A Will to Win: The Heroic Resistance, Survival and Triumph of Black Australia*, Sydney, 1985.

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announces James Hillman hopefully.¹ Some feminists and men's movement writers attack the hero as an overgrown bully, even a rapist and warmonger.² The hero and his baggage have become burdens which many would shed.³

Perhaps we are witnessing the end-time of a heroic culture, and can look and work towards the rise of more democratic, less aggressive and nongendered metamyths.⁴ If this is true, the demise of the hero would be an event of profound mythological significance, well worthy of eulogising. However, the evidence is equivocal. After all, Thomas Carlyle noted back in 1841 that 'in these days Hero-worship... professes to have gone out, and finally ceased'.⁵ In spite of the disdain of intellectuals, Hollywood continues to churn out action heroes for worldwide consumption, and in sport and political life, too, the quest goes on for heroes who will endure longer than Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame. That the hero appears to be unwilling to roll over and die suggests that he represents an important part of who we are, whether we like it or not. Moreover, the death of the hero is often his apotheosis and the making of his cult, so in proclaiming his death we may be doing him the highest honour.

If we accept that the hero is a figure of particular relevance to the west, then the obvious question is, why? This is, of course, a huge topic. There have been so many mythic and historical figures recognised as heroes: where to start? To trace the career of even one hero such as Ulysses through Western history is a huge task.⁶ The job is made more complex by the range of methodologies applied

1 Hillman, 'The Great Mother, Her Son, Her Hero, and the Puer', in Patricia Berry, ed., *Fathers and Mothers*, Dallas, 1990, p. 191.

2 See, e.g., Robin Morgan, *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism*, New York, 1989, ch. 2, or Allen Chinen, *Beyond the Hero: Classic Stories of Men in Search of Soul*, New York, 1993, esp. p. 8.

3 For instance, Australian academic and writer Andrew Reimer returns from a trip to his Central European homeland, 'where grandiose heroic myths do much to pollute the cultural environment', complaining of 'the heroic commemoration of robbers, bandits and murderers in bronze, stone and paint' and expressing his gratitude for the characteristic Australian 'dislike of the monumental', 'The Kelly Myth Refined' (review of *Our Sunshine*, by Robert Drewe), in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23/11/1991.

4 Here I am using the term metamyth not in the sense of 'a study of the study of myth' (Jaán Puhvel, *Comparative Mythology*, Baltimore, 1987, p. 7) but to mean a fundamental or paradigmatic myth.

5 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, London 1908, p. 249; though on the other hand, on p. 252 he refers to the indestructibility of the hero.

6 E.g., John Sanford, *The Ulysses Theme*, Dallas, 1992.

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to hero myths this century, from the Frazerian (Raglan), the psychoanalytic (Rank) and the Jungian (Jung himself, Campbell) to the feminist (Baring and Cashford, Morgan) and masculist (Chinen). Finally, while there have been several attempts over more than a century to find patterns among hero narratives, the figures chosen and the events seen as representative differ widely.

To narrow the subject, we can begin with the question of definition. The English word hero comes from the Greek *heros*, defender or protector, and possibly from the Proto-Indo-European root **ser-*, to protect. In Hesiod the hero is a demigod, the offspring of a god and a mortal woman, emphasising his role as a transitional figure and a mediator between the divine and human realms. In Homer the divine element is largely irrelevant, and the hero is 'a man of strength or courage or one who was especially venerated for his wisdom... [or] the prince of an illustrious family like Odysseus or Menelaus'.¹ Homer thus began a process of demythologising that continues to this day, when the hero is most often regarded merely as an exemplary human being with few, if any, divine attributes.

The question of what constitutes a hero is especially problematic when we consider the various patterns scholars have discerned among hero narratives. Johann von Hahn, Otto Rank and Lord Raglan could all be accused of selecting only those myths and legends which fit their preconceived patterns. In spite of this problem, as well as internal inconsistencies and differences in the patterns isolated by these three scholars (and to a lesser extent Vladimir Propp and Joseph Campbell), folklorist Alan Dundes is able to conclude that 'an empirically demonstrable hero biography pattern for (Indo) European (and Semitic) heroes exists'.²

In short, the pattern applies most strongly to Greek and other Indo-European mythologies, then to Semitic heroes, and less often outside these cultural milieus. The themes most prevalent include a prophesy that the hero will cause the death of his father, abandonment or attempted murder at birth, raising by peasants or animals, a journey to a far off land, battle with a monster, return to the hero's homeland, marriage to a princess and crowning as king, sometimes after usurping the father. Obviously many of these themes do not apply to numerous modern heroes, but the pattern remains in our mythic and historical background, and as Dundes

1 F. Guirand, 'Greek Mythology', in *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology*, London, 1968, p. 93.

2 Dundes, 'The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus', in Robert Segal, ed., *In Quest of the Hero*, Princeton, 1990.

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shows, they can often be applied with remarkable success in the cases even of historical figures whose biographies have become heroised, such as Jesus.

If we accept the thesis that the hero is a figure of particular relevance to the west, then again, the question is why - or rather, what might this mean to us as westerners? In the remainder of this paper I want to briefly explore hero narratives from two angles - their origins and relationship to male rites of passage - before attempting to find a common thread that will help to answer this question.

Firstly to origins. The origins of the hero of ancient mythologies have been related to the transformation of the animal guardian common in the mythologies of hunting cultures into the hero of pastoral and planting mythologies (including Paleolithic and Neolithic Europe, respectively); to technological changes resulting in the evolution of warfare in the Near East in the third millennium BCE;¹ and to the tripartite social structures and mythologies of the Indo-Europeans. The first of these suggests that the hero embodies the changing power balance between the human and natural worlds between the end of the Paleolithic and the beginnings of recorded history - personified especially in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, with Gilgamesh's victory over his 'animal' brother Enkidu and Enkidu's death - while the latter two explanations for the origins of the hero relate it to the rise of large-scale warfare. They may be related: civilization is founded on the attempt to overcome death, whether it threatens in the form of human or animal enemies or natural forces, and the hero personifies this attempt: man becomes god-like by his efforts to control the forces of life and death.

The rise of the hero has also been related to the social and family structures of the ancient Mediterranean world. Philip Slater argues that the dominance of hero myths in ancient Greece may be the product of narcissistic mother-son relationships, with large age

¹ Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, London, p. 174. The authors relate the origins of the hero to the domestication of horses and the invention of bronze. Both of these developments were instrumental in the evolution of warfare, which became commonplace in the Near East in the third millennium B.C.E. The hero, say Baring and Cashford, arose as a response to this new world: 'the new myth of the Iron Age is that of the solar hero god who confronts and kills the devouring dragon of darkness and chaos.' In Babylon, the *Enuma Elish* (originally dating from around 1600 B.C.E.), which tells of the defeat of the great goddess Tiamat by her descendant Marduk, became the prototype for other Iron Age myths of the defeat of a monster by a solar god or hero.

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differences between husbands and wives contributing to strongly Oedipal mother-son bonds, which sons could only break out of by rejecting their mothers and the feminine in general. Dundes sees a similar pattern existing throughout the Mediterranean world today as several thousand years ago, while Slater sees it extending even to modern middle-class America (and by extension to elsewhere in the West). According to this theory, the hero is he who must initiate himself into manhood because there is not enough 'father' to help him in this process, and the closer 'mum' is, the more aggressive must be the separation from her.¹

Secondly to rites of passage. Hero myths often follow the structure of rites of passage. A prominent example is Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth', which he says is

a magnification of the formula prepresented [sic] in the rites of passage: separation - initiation - return. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.²

Thus Campbell's universal hero is a mythic equivalent of the novice in a traditional rite of passage; his departure, adventures and return representing the novice's separation, liminal experience, and reincorporation into society, respectively.³

Although there are serious problems with Campbell's formula, there are well-documented links between hero myths and legends

¹ As Hillman says, 'When the father is absent, we fall more readily into the arms of the mother' ('The Great Mother, Her Son, Her Lover and the Hero', in Patricia Berry, ed., *Fathers and Mothers*, Dallas, 1990, p. 196.)

² *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, London, 1975, p. 31.

³ However, Campbell's hero sets out as a fully mature adult, whereas Eliade and Burkert emphasise the relationship of heroes to puberty rites in ancient Greece. Von Hahn's 'exposure and return' pattern is easily assimilable to the same formula; as is Rank's, if one counts finding the parents and taking revenge on the father, and the achievement of rank and honours, as experiences of return or reincorporation following being cast out and saved and reared by animals or peasants. But Rank's pattern differs in that it covers only the first half of life, and is concerned less with completing a circle than with 'the detachment of the growing individual from the authority of the parents'. In *The Mind of the Traveler*, historian Eric Leed offers an interpretation of the journeys of mythic and historical heroes which also follows van Gennep, emphasising departure as loss, travel as a liminal experience, and return as reincorporation involving a change in status.

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and male rites of passage in a range of cultures.¹ However, they differ in important ways from other, non-heroic rites of passage. To put it very simply, in most traditional cultures a boy must undergo an experience of symbolic death and rebirth in order to become a man. Heroic feats of strength, courage and endurance are often involved, but seldom at the expense of some experience of surrendering to death at the hands of male elders, ancestors, animal spirits or gods. In this way the boy dies to childhood, breaks his bonds with the mother, and is born into the world of adults - and especially of men.

Beginning perhaps with the Proto-Indo-Europeans, however, Western cultures developed rites and related myths in which the experience of symbolic death is less important in the making of men than the attempt to *overcome* death. Thus, heroes are associated primarily with the second, warrior function in Dumézil's theory of the tripartite structure of Indo-European mythologies and societies.²

¹ See especially Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture*, London, 1958, ch. 4-5.

² In fact, a class of either semi-divine, semi-human mythic figures, or of ancestors with superhuman powers who became the subject of legends, is missing in Iran and India. In Europe, however, it is widely attested: for instance, in Celtic myths of Cuchulainn and Fin Mac Cool (or Fionn mac Cumal), the Germanic Siegfried, and of course the Greek and Roman heroes. These heroes are the mythic equivalents of bands of young warriors such as the Celtic *fiana* and Germanic *Mannerbund*.

While the behaviour of these European brotherhoods share some features with those still found in traditional cultures, there are also important differences. Accounts of furies like that of the berserkers are rare in shamanic initiations or the rites of hunters in general. The 'animal' is, in European men's societies, 'enraged', and is invoked as a preparation for warfare, rather than as a spirit guide, a totemic ancestor, or an animal guardian. This reflects the changed power between the two realms: the animal became less a god to be propitiated than a power to be harnessed. Also, rites of passage into European brotherhoods, like the mythologies of these cultures (in particular the Germanic and Celtic branches), involved passing tests of skill, strength, courage and endurance, more than the experience of symbolic death and rebirth.

The *fiana* and their like in other cultures were mostly bands of youths who existed as 'wild men', outside of society, for a time between youth and manhood proper. Isolation from society, heroic feats, and transformation into a wild animal indicate that the novice is between worlds. For whatever reasons, this liminal state became permanent, resulting eventually in the creation of standing armies. And this class in some cases became dominant; Dumézil notes that while the god of the second (warrior) function in India was Indra, the god of war, in Germanic mythology it was Odin, the supreme deity, reflecting 'the

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The 'triple trial' which numerous European heroes must pass in order to win the 'treasure hard to attain' bears strong similarities to Eliade's archaic pattern of initiation (first puberty rites, then initiations into secret societies, finally initiations into sacred vocations of shaman or priest), with the third function and the puberty rite being related to sexuality, the second and men's societies to warfare, and the magical or priestly aspect of the first to sacred vocations such as that of the shaman.¹

At first sight it might appear that nothing was lost; that in fact, since the king (as the model for the 'accomplished man') had to pass tests relating to fertility, warfare and the sacred, the man who passed these tests in a European culture was a more 'complete' person than his archaic counterpart, who may only have undergone a puberty or men's society rite. However, note that the three trials are each *tests* - for instance, of virtue, courage, and intelligence - to be passed, rather than experiences to be endured. This emphasis reflects the fact that hero myths, even when they involve a triple trial, are associated primarily with Dumézil's second function and Eliade's second category of initiations, being more concerned with overcoming death than with surrendering to it.

The Indo-European triple trial - the ancestor of many European hero myths, including those of Odysseus, Jason, Bellerophon, Cuchulainn and others - may thus be considered to be a test of manhood that is passed more by the overcoming of death than by surrender to it. This pattern is reflected in the modern West's worship of heroics in sport, war and work: one becomes a man largely by beating other men, and by proving oneself closest to immortality.

This pattern is implicit in such modern commentators on heroes such as the Freudian Ernest Becker, who sees heroics as a defence against death. It is reflected, too, in the hero myth developed in Jung's first major work, *Transformations and Symbols of the Libido* (1911-12), in which he perpetuates the pattern common to Western

evolution of the warrior function among the Germans', which saw it merge with the priestly class in this warlike culture.

¹ Although other initiations, such as those into 'mysteries' such as Eleusis, and women's initiations in general, do not correspond in this way, it raises the question - asked of Dumézil's work by others - of whether tripartition is so ingrained in Indo-European cultures that it continues to unconsciously influence even modern scholars like Eliade, or whether, on the other hand, divisions into three are so universal that correspondences between cultures or periods can always be found if one looks hard enough.

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cultures by making the hero the tutelary figure of the quest for psychological maturity. That is, one becomes a man by heroically struggling free of the dominance of the mother (whether 'great' - i.e., archetypal - or personal) and making it in the big bad world.

The downside of this pattern, however, is that one is forced (like Parsifal after he ran away from his mother) to come back at midlife and complete the initiation via a midlife crisis, which often amounts to a surrender to death in the form of marriage breakdowns, career inertia, disease, depression and the like. While this is what happened to Jung, he was also aware of the problems of a one-sided heroism and introduced another theme into *Transformations*, speaking of the hero as an infantile figure who must be sacrificed in order to mature.¹ Many writers of the men's movement are in agreement with this aspect of Jung's approach to the hero: he is aggressive, immature, dangerous, and must be sacrificed to have mature relationships with women, children and other men.

This has become the dominant contemporary approach to the hero, but I wonder whether it is any more valid or efficacious than the one it has supplanted. In other words, whereas the West inherited a model of masculinity in which manhood was obtained by the attempted conquest of death (literal or symbolic), in this post-feminist age we have rejected this model in favour of a caring, sharing initiation into manhood in which the confrontation with death plays little part. Much better would be to find ways to make men that honour the historical links with heroics, while also recognising that the attempt to overcome death has negative consequences: that is, ways to hold Jung's 'tension of opposites', so that the pull of death can be felt, surrendered to or resisted, as the situation requires. The problem is that this requires the presence of an effective male 'womb', and this is lacking in the modern West, where fathers are notable often for their absence (whether physical or emotional), and where they are present are often abusive in one way or another.

The desire to overcome death and its symbolic analogues, nature and tradition, has been fundamental to Western ingenuity and expansiveness; this is a culture that has constantly sought to penetrate, expand, surpass (materially, if not spiritually). But where

¹ Unfortunately, most of his followers picked up on the heroic theme of *Transformations* and neglected the sacrificial one (at least until midlife), while Hillman took the opposite road and has spent much of his oeuvre attacking the hero as mother-bound and immature. These Jungian developments are analysed in my as yet unpublished PhD thesis, *A Dance in Death: The Hero and Male Initiation in Jungian Mythology*, University of Sydney, 1996.

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others would try to kill off the hero as an aggressive, immature tool of patriarchal oppression, I would suggest that we might be better off remembering that heroics can be one mode not only of avoiding and transcending death, but also of experiencing it. Think of the frequency with which modern hero narratives centre around the protagonist coming close to death (often through a long period of confinement) and emerging not victorious but transformed, humbled: Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta, Nelson Mandela in prison for over two decades, or a Beirut hostage like Brian Kiernan (*An Evil Cradling*), who survived years of degradation, torture and isolation by sheer strength of will.

Such figures capture our imaginations because we see that through their sufferings, their 'little deaths', they act not out of the ego gratification - the blind, relentless pursuit of some purely personal goal - associated with another, grosser mode of heroism. This is one respect in which (*contra* Hillman) the modern hero appears superior to his ancient counterpart. The Greek heroes were often to our eyes selfish and immature figures even at the end of their journeys and trials (think of Odysseus slaughtering Penelope's suitors on his return to Ithaca), a moment of glory before death in war being far preferable to a long but uneventful life at home. Today, however, the heroes who endure in popular appeal are those who are selfless (at least in the popular imagination: the reality of their personal lives may be quite different). I would therefore distinguish between two kinds of heroics. One is self-oriented; the other, which usually requires the experience of a symbolic death (that is, the sacrifice of self), is world-oriented. One is a denial of death, the other involves an encounter with it. However, it is also true that there are times when it is equally important to surrender, give up, admit failure, rather than pushing on. Heroics, in other words, are not always the answer. It is also important to recognise that there is nothing especially heroic about much of what we do in our ordinary lives - bringing home the bacon, making the kids' lunches, painting the gutters - and that the desire for a heroic life is inimical to our common humanity. As one matures, it ought to be like a potential held in reserve for extreme circumstances - bushfires, the threat of violence, campaigns against injustice, and so on - rather than a need that drives us on a daily basis.

The particular Australian experience of the hero may be relevant here. This is a land the hero of European imperialism could not conquer; thus the journals of explorers and modern novels are full of disappointment, despair and death. However, out of this experience has arisen a quite specific variety of hero worship. In

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Australia we honour what film critic Paul Byrnes calls 'the heroism of failure'.¹ From the swagman in 'Waltzing Matilda' through Gallipoli to Voss and Mad Max, we pay homage to those who have been defeated, but who survive in some form nonetheless; who have learnt a tolerance, a humility, and a defiance through their defeats rather than their triumphs; who have attained a healthy respect for nature and death. This is what Australia has taught us, and - while it sometimes verges on cynicism - it is a valuable quality, one that I would argue represents an advance on the ancient Greek conception of the hero.

In summary, then, what do these reflections about the hero tell us about Western culture: that it is godless, out of touch with nature, and immature? From one perspective, yes. But every mythic figure and every story has its shadow: the hero needs the animal as surely as Christ needs Satan to complement his goodness. My aim has been not to criticise the heroic nature of Western culture so much as to suggest that the deeper our appreciation of the complexities of myth, the less likely we will be to try and dump important parts of our mythology because they happen not to suit us in some ways. 'The wound and the eye are one and the same', writes Hillman. If the hero is a problem for the modern West, then the solution lies not in abandoning this most powerful and enduring of our mythic figures, but in salving his wounds, which are ours.

There are several wounds common to heroes. The frequency of mother-love and -hate I have already touched on. Rage and madness, from Cuchulainn to Heracles, is another, but one which I cannot explore here. The greatest of these wounds may, however, be the hero's desire to become godlike by overcoming death. Even through this desire, and the longing and tragedy that accompany it, we are brought into a closer relationship with death. But I suspect that our reliance on heroics would be lessened if we explored other modes of relating to death, rather than treating it as a curse. Thanks to Kubler-Ross and others, this is gradually happening, and I expect that it, rather than heroic attempts at what might be called 'mythic engineering', will result in a reduction of our dependence on the hero.

However, our dependence upon the hero may also be a result of the 'death of God'. When God seems to be, if not dead then at least *otiosis*, absent from a world that has lately given us Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Rwanda and Bosnia, then perhaps the hero carries upon his shoulders the burden of our longing for connection to the

¹ Review of Gillian Armstrong's film of Peter Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, Sydney Morning Herald, January 15, 1998.

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divine, to a world and a life greater than our own. No surprise, then, that we worship the 'stars' - the celestial divinities - of television, pop music, sport and especially cinema, who exist larger than life in our imaginations as well as in the dark of the silver screen. No wonder, that they so easily disappoint us, for people elevated to the status of a demigod on the basis of physical prowess, beauty or (occasionally) acting ability rarely provide us with the wisdom and moral leadership we need of gods. The heroes of popular culture, in other words, are the gods and goddesses of the (post) modern West. No wonder, too, that in spite of the disdain of intellectuals and the rapidity with which we discover they have feet of clay, we keep throwing up new heroes for popular consumption.

But if we cannot invent gods any more than we can kill off heroes, where does this leave us? To put it bluntly, I think that the post-Christian West needs to re-deify death. Not just to see it as part of God's inscrutable plan, but to give it a name, a face, a standing in our religious lives equal to the giver of life. Then we might be less inclined to see death in heroic terms, as a tragedy that medical science or nuclear weapons or prayer will help us to keep at bay. In ancient Greece, the heroes were chthonic figures - especially until Homer separated the underworld from the Olympian world. Even more than they, who had Hades, we need to give death names, faces, dates, costumes, habits and haunts. Then perhaps we will see Kali and Frau Holle and Baba Juga and the rest behind the masks worn by the Rambos and Schwartskopfs of this world, and heroism will take on other meanings entirely. As Kerenyi puts it, the cult of the hero 'is after all a cult of the dead'.

