

The Non-Hero, The Super-Hero and The Meta-Hero

Mikhail Lermontov, the poet of the Caucasus, the most celebrated Russian poet after Alexander Pushkin, is less known internationally, this due partly to the fact that he mostly wrote poems and poems might not be as easy to render in other languages as prose is. In his short and very Byronic life (he died in a duel at the age of 27 after he was sent on exile as a Dragoon in the Caucasus mountains, just like in his story), Lermontov did manage however to write a novel, known in English as *A Hero of Our Time*. The story is an account of Pechorin, a non-hero whom, according to Lermontov own words written in the preface, "is a portrait built up of all our generation's vices in full bloom". Pechorin is the usual Byronic and nihilist hero, a most bored young man who is however full of courage to the point that, in one of the five novellas which the book comprises of, he dares to steal Bela, a princess belonging to a Circassian tribe. This courage is however rather impulsive and Pechorin shows no emotions in future developments of the story when he, for instance, after many years, meets his comrade, Maxim Maximytch to whom he delegates his diaries before going to a trip to India and there die. It is rather striking the insignificance of this non-heroic "disappearance" similar to that of other "nonheroes" belonging to the 19th century literary tradition.

We may as well recall another non-hero, conceived by the naturalist Russian writer Ivan Turgenev in his short novel *Father and Sons*. The non-hero in question, Yegveny Bazarov, is a newly graduated medical student who goes on holiday at the family farmstead of his university classmate, Arkady. At the farm we have a very symbolic antagonism between the romantic and aristocratic views of Pavel Petrovich, Arkady's brother, and the scientific and nihilistic ones of the above mentioned Bazarov. Aside from the actual story, the antagonism may in itself be of relevance to elucidate on the very shift occurring towards the end of the 19th century from the former character to the other, from an aristocratic personage filled with meanings to a youngster basing his observations on science alone, scorning these meanings with the arrogance predicted by Socrates concerning the new pupils who are to learn the technique of reading and writing.

If in the first two instances we see the representative heroes of the 19th century, the non-heroes, dying in most meaningless ways (Bazarov is to die at his parents' cabin after being deceived paradoxically by Anna Sergeevna Odintsova, a noble woman), the end of the 19th century presents us with a new kind of hero, a non-hero that is now completely conscious that no Napoleonic enterprises are possible in a much bureaucratized and Kafkian society, this new non-hero is Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, the main

protagonist of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Aside from the focus on the effects one is to experience after committing a crime, the literary critique may address the causes. The non-hero in question has had in fact an urge to accomplish in his youth something heroic. In the novel there are a few accounts of the protagonist himself trying, for instance, to save the life of two little children trapped in a house on fire, this episode being paradoxically similar to an antecedent found in Leo Tolstoy's opus magnum *War and Peace* where the Count Pyotr Bezukhov, after loosing his mind in several philanthropic projects, rescues a small child from a house set accidentally on fire by the uncontrollable troops of Napoleon plundering Moscow. Yet, while the Count recuperates his head during his imprisonment following the retreating Napoleonic troops, Rodion Romanovich loses his head completely to the point that his heroic action becomes that of killing Alyona Ivanovna, a money lender and a Jewish-like woman. For Rodion as well (as for Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich half a century later), imprisonment in the harsh Russian landscape is a recuperation of sanity, particularly by seeing a nomadic tribe passing through the horizon.

One may be as bold as to assume that these Russian authors among many other Russian and international authors, are addressing a frustration of the modern and technology-comforted human. It is not too bold either to admit that the events that have so dramatically characterized the European and world history of the 20th century are not completely unlinked to these literary premises. Ironically speaking, the German dictator himself, Adolf Hitler may be seen as a Raskolnikov, who, unsuccessful in his efforts to pursue an artistic career and socially emancipated, turned to politics and did in fact manage to resurrect the Napoleonic hero, a model that Raskolnikov much longed for. Hitler too, like Napoleon, invaded Russia and there he too found his sanity with the natural impossibility he had to face, not to mention that he too, like Raskolnikov, solved to kill Jews among other minorities. In this respect we finally see the failure of this Überheld, a super-hero violently transcending the nihilism of a bourgeois reality and its emancipation, yet resulting in a state where the heroic will, amplified by technology, finds no boundaries but that of self-destruction and ultimately becomes a Überschurke, a super-villain.

History here may seem to come to an end. The technical media, being too much of a personal amplifier have thus created the conditions for a democracy where the individual's will is limited, in order not to threaten other individuals. The concept of affective economy, coined by Sara Ahmed, is in this case relevant to explicate the incubation of conflicts in such a mediated context, particularly where individuals are kept confined in the manifestation of their will and are offered "bread and circus" in the

form of "public media pacifiers". Has the heroic model then completely vanished from a Western culture that has so quickly rebuilt itself to saturation? Are heroes only the projections we can find in what the media industry administers to us through their pretentious fictions? Nonetheless, like poisoning mushrooms of a rather controlled underbrush, the Raskolnikov types keep popping up unpredictably. Affections, like spores, spread, being lightly carried by the wind, our telecommunication technologies, the most light and fast messenger. Are those then the real heroes that our mediated culture generates?

We may as well follow these lines or, as this essay intends to pursue, we can take a glance back at the cultural development of our past century maintaining our focus on the heroic models it has in fact produced. If then, on one side, it is rather obvious that one model is that of the "super-hero", the fanatic terrorist (Hitler as well as the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, or recently the Norwegian right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik), the other could be the total negation of it, as Bernardo Bertolucci depicted in his 1970s movie *The Conformist*, a character with absolutely no ideals to stand for, a passive being a total "non-hero". Among the latter heroes of which there are many instances, and to which we could ourselves associate to, there seems to be however a variant which stands out as a model of its own.

We may now think of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a paradoxically non-eventful character which he names with a very unglamorous name, Leopold Bloom. We could then write entire essays and books speculating about the non-heroic nature of Leopold Bloom, yet something very remarkable can be completely left unspoken. This remarkable observation is that, while in fact Leopold Bloom might belong to the category of the non-hero, the very conceiver of the character, James Joyce is a whole new hero of his own, giving the possibility to coin a third category which has barely been noticed. While Leopold conducts his passive and uneventful life as the life of the non-hero, James Joyce's life was certainly most active. Rather than explode the system as the super-hero terrorist, or just live with it as the non-hero conformist, Joyce's heroic operandi lays in his labor, a labor which finds him massively absorbing and re-manipulating all that the information society casted onto him. Joyce takes the ready-made and restitches it, in an activity of appropriating and re-signifying. It opens up cultural and existential alternatives among those of destroying or conforming, it is that of regenerating the ready made fragments of reality to then bring them out of the fridge and make a new dough out of them. It is some kind of a cut and paste technique as described by Hebdige, not a sporadic method but a real immersive practice overarching Joyce's activity. In this case a rather Eastern type of hero (are the Eastern and Western

civilizations swapping their polarities?), like a Buddhist monk set to meditate his own inner self and then reproduce it in a mandala. With such comparison one could say that the media are in fact an extension of our inner self and Joyce's work may be addressed as that of a meditating Buddhist collecting bits from it and later reconnecting them.

To put more emphasis on the regenerating part of this newly hypothesized heroic model, we might think of Dziga Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera". Even here bits of reality are gathered and then recomposed. The hero becomes the very man with the movie camera, who climbs the chimney of the new communist Russia of the 1920s from dusk to dawn. We thus now switch our focus to this new form of hero, a hero who embraces with genuine enthusiasm what the new technologies are bringing about; both media to consume, as in the case of Joyce, and media to produce, as in the case of Vertov. In this case the author becomes the very actor as in a pantomime, yet to re-frame from Walter Benjamin's discussion that the actor is aware of the filming device, we might argue that the continuous pervasiveness of the documenting medium in everyday life and its progressive unobtrusiveness (both in terms of hardware and software) has quite erased such a sensation.

The formulation of this type of hero is rather important. For the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, it could fulfill a vision of a human being that is not shaped by technology but rather uses technology as its medium. This vision was also conceived a decade later by the American scientist Vannevar Bush in his article "As We May Think" where he also describes the possibility of the Memex, a wearable device which could allow the scientist of the future to use technology as rather a way to enhance his intellectual faculties by means of capturing and retrieving thoughts in the form of visual memories. The post-war pessimism linked to our other two forms of heroic models, the conforming non-hero and the destructive super-hero, has somewhat postponed the advent of such a character, which we may dare to define as the meta-hero. In a trajectory we could draw from the non-hero to the super-hero and to finally the meta-hero, we are able to detect how, through the usage of the media, the hero progressively becomes the author himself. This process is already rather recognizable in all the literary examples given in this text and particularly for Lermontov and Dostoyevsky.

It took half a century before techno-humanists such as Steve Mann, resurrected Bush's idea or simply followed up to what technology started to offer them, the possibility of creating wearable computers for personal awareness, an awareness and a persona threaten by the predominant rise of international corporations and their surveillance and mediatized systems they adopt to survey and consequently control the market

economy. The 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium had been a rather promising realization of such a counter and individual oriented phenomena named by Mann sousveillance. At that time, the World Wide Web was an open ground for experiments, a channel for each individual to craft and project themselves, an open frontier for the new pioneers. This until corporations saw the possibility for profit and once again turned individuals into a passive media consumer. In the new media evolution, any element that would have allowed personal craftsmanship has been diminished and the focus is in fact primarily on designing for media consumption. Statistics also show that most of social media users, for instance Facebook users, are really careful to post but mostly are there to consume other people's posts (an interesting program in this respect would be to devise an artificial user that posts stuff).

Under these premises, we may be able to distinguish the culture produced by the masses through the interfaces provided by the media giants and an underground culture of individuals drafting their own interfaces and tools, partisans of the now corporation colonized World Wide Web. Going back to Tolstoy and his "War and Peace", we might find that the real hero is not a Napoleon Bonaparte, who is only the representative of what was anyway inevitable (the West invading the East), but the real heroes are only among the Russian partisans and their guerrilla warfare against the retreating Napoleonic army. The "Men and Women with their Digital Devices", despite their non-violent approach, are in fact good candidates to become the meta-heroes, or ontological cultivators, of our contemporary culture, outsiders of any high art establishment. The models for these meta-heroes could follow up on American transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy himself, who, in the last years of his life, inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World As Will and Representation*, looked back at Western and Eastern philosophy and embraced asceticism (not to mention Gandhi who was inspired by the two authors and named his first commune Tolstoy).

To conclude this journey across the main representations of heroic models in our technological time, we can present a really striking and gender correct example, the incredible life long enterprise of a totally emancipated Polish woman, Janina Turek. From 1941, when her husband was confined in a concentration camp, to the time she died sixty years later, Mrs. Turek collected on more than seven hundred note-books every details of her life such as all the TV programs she watched, everyone she saw, all the phone calls she received and so forth. As these kinds of enterprises may be also judged quantitatively, her work of a low class yet well read woman, can be far more relevant than the equivalent work of much celebrated artists within the Olympus of the

high art, such as On Kawara and her countryman Roman Opalka. Janina is just one of the many cultural producers selected out by the elite of cultural managers which only a historical revision of cultural phenomena can bring back to life. She represents a model of a hero that is at last compatible with the ever technological age: the housewife.