

# TRUE HEROES DON'T DIE, THEIR HEARTS GET EATEN — AGAIN AND AGAIN

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*Resumo: Tradicionalmente, o «heroísmo» era uma virtude procurada e elogiada na guerra. Hoje essa qualidade é encontrada nas demandas da administração social comum. No entanto, há uma contradição entre o «heróico» e o «democrático». Esse clichê de heroísmo esconde um conflito fundamental na sociedade ocidental, enraizado nas noções positivas e negativas de liberdade e nas reações à Revolução Francesa.*

*Palavras-chave: Romantismo; Heroísmo; Liberdade positiva.*

*Abstract: Traditionally «heroism» was a virtue sought and praised in war. Today this quality is found in demands for ordinary social management. Yet there is a contradiction between the «heroic» and the «democratic». This cliché of heroism conceals a fundamental conflict in Western society, one which is rooted in the positive and negative notions of liberty and the reactions to the French Revolution.*

*Keywords: Romanticism; Heroism; Positive liberty.*

Today's hero in popular culture is a corrupted version of Milton's Satan, a collaborator with the rigged game of a tyrannical God. His errors are the violations of God's law but God does not really mind since He knows that humans could never follow these arbitrary rules. Satan is God's deniability<sup>1</sup>.

Shelley (and Mark Twain<sup>2</sup>) recognized this and therefore sought a heroic character who does not pretend to compete with God and refuses to deny his alliance with humanity.

This mistake denies him a simple death and condemns him to the punishment of repetition. The inability to prevent the recurrence of history and all the pain this brings.

In Portugal, the parliamentary budget debates of the past years — at least as reported in the national media — gave more attention to the German finance minister (as representative of the richest EU state and the banks domiciled there, which are leading creditors in subordinate member-states like Greece and Portugal) than to the vocal complaints of Portuguese citizens<sup>3</sup>. This is even more bizarre when considering the preliminary conclusions about the catastrophic fires in our country in 2017<sup>4</sup>. For decades now we have been told that the fail-

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<sup>1</sup> *Plausible deniability* is a concept attributed to the US national security policy to characterise the imperative of covert action. The principle is simply that any covert action should only be performed if, should it be exposed, it is possible to deny official responsibility for the action. Then CIA director William Colby explained the doctrine as understood by the Agency in hearings before the so-called «Church Committee», (US Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities) on 16 September 1975.

<sup>2</sup> TWAIN, 1962. Twain's satirical treatment of the Creation is presented in the form of correspondence between Satan and his heavenly brethren, the archangels.

<sup>3</sup> At the time, the German finance minister was Wolfgang Schäuble (from 2009–2017) Schäuble has been a CDU member of the German federal parliament since 1972, the longest serving active member of the party that has dominated German politics since 1949.

<sup>4</sup> In 2017 there were massive forest fires throughout central Portugal. In one notorious case, Pedrógão Grande, many people were burned alive in their cars as they tried to escape through the few roads in the rural area. Preliminary investigations showed that aside from the natural conditions conducive to fires, the failure to invest in training and equipment for local forest management and fire departments and the chronic neglect of the rural areas by national government aggravated the damage immensely.

ures, the mistakes, of European democracies (especially in Southern Europe) have been caused by the absence of heroic leadership (whether by individuals or parties). Such heroism would mean that elected representatives and governments would make the hard choices against the will of their electorates needed to remedy the «errors of fiscal irresponsibility» that are the cause of our misery. Of course discretion or good taste impede calls for «heroic autocrats» these days<sup>5</sup>. The «Heroism» is supposed to be more anonymous and perhaps less accountable. What are as those «errors» and what does «heroism» really means in this context.

1. The Portuguese national poet Luís Camões wrote a sonnet in which he says that he would have been ruined by «love alone» — his errors were incidental<sup>6</sup>. Camões however was a pre-Revolutionary poet and we might assume that he was lamenting failed love, more than history. However, the point is that while all love fails it is the pre-condition of humanity and therefore it is reborn.

2. What does ERROR mean? ERROR can be best understood today as the inadequacy of the human to respond perfectly — individually and as a species — to the environment. Sometimes error or creativity is just what is needed by a stagnant culture. This is the central thesis of Morse Peckham's *Man's Rage for Chaos*<sup>7</sup>. Peckham began with this book to ask the question «whether there is a biological explanation for the arts?». Any answer to this question must begin with the fact that humans are born into a world in which they are dependent on others (in particular, adults) for food and protection for a rather long time compared to other animals. Furthermore virtually everything humans do to survive must be taught and learned. And as anyone can observe it is virtually impossible to learn anything perfectly — so humans spend most of their time making «mistakes». We have learned at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century to distinguish between mistakes that are errors, mistakes that are crimes, and mistakes that are «creative». Therefore, it probably makes more sense NOT to ask «do we learn from mistakes?» but what do we mean when we say we have «learned» anything?

3. Consider the meaning of «hero» and «heroism». Heroism is a role.<sup>8</sup> In Western culture the basic models for heroes are derived from interpreting classical Greek and Roman mythology. In fact *Os Lusíadas*, for which Camões is most famous, is also an explicit comparison with ancient Greek heroism. The hero as we all know is by definition an exception. Something she or he does has to be beyond what the majority do — otherwise it would be indistinguishable from the behaviour of that majority. If the majority follows conventional rules of behaviour, then heroism is and heroes are unconventional — that is to say first of all mistakes, failure for whatever reason to behave in accordance with conventions.

<sup>5</sup> Portugal's autocratic ruler from 1928-1968, António de Oliveira Salazar, was initially invested with wide powers as finance minister on the pretext that courageous fiscal authority was needed to save Portugal.

<sup>6</sup> CAMÕES, Luís, *Erros meus, má fortuna, amor ardente* Sonnet CXCI (My errors, cruel fortune and ardent love, trans. Richard ZENITH, 2009). *Erros meus, má fortuna, amor ardente/em minha perdição se conjuraram;/os erros e a fortuna sobejaram,/que para mim bastava o amor somente.//Tudo passei;/mas tenho tão presente/a grande dor das cousas que passaram,/que as magoadas iras me ensinaram/a não querer já nunca ser contente.//Errei todo o discurso de meus anos;/dei causa [a] que a Fortuna castigasse/as minhas mal fundadas esperanças.//De amor não vi senão breves enganos.//Oh! quem tanto pudesse que fartasse/este meu duro génio de vinganças!*

<sup>7</sup> PECKHAM, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> CARLYLE, 1841. All societies set up heroes who embody their values. Heroes are essentially a religious way of looking at life. Jesus is a hero, too. Prometheus is a type of Jesus.

However the heroes of classical antiquity — at least as conventionally presented — were part of what might be called the divine universe. Their acts were mistakes — violations of the conventions among the deities, errors made by gods and demi-gods. Man was at best a conduit, not an agent. To the extent that heroism was relevant to humans it was by virtue of human submission to the gods. One of the best examples of this is the myth of Sisyphus<sup>9</sup>.

4. Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century this divine drama — at least in Europe had been transferred from the celestial to the terrestrial monarchical system. One can see this in the arts of the period. The transfer of divine law from the ancient gods, to the Church and then to monarchies, did not go unchallenged, as the English Civil War demonstrated. Milton defended his staunch republicanism by turning Satan into the hero of his *Paradise Lost*.

However by 1789, the convention of divine law — whether vested in the Church or in the monarch — was threatened by what turned out to be a major cultural crisis which exploded in the French Revolution. Critics of the Revolution, both contemporary and since then have blamed the mass violence and wars triggered by the overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy on a massive error: the belief that human equality and democracy could be a substitute for what was now called «natural law». Opposed to this was a wide spread optimism that having swept away the obstacles of kings and priests, it would be possible to create a religion of humanity. In fact in the first years of the Revolution there was a movement to reorganise religion in France by creating a cult with appropriate rites and festivals as a substitute for the Catholic Church. What is important here is that significant participants in the Revolution recognised that the abolition of the monarchy and the secularisation of the Catholic clergy were negative acts and that a culture, especially one undergoing change needs positive acts. So while opponents of the Revolution preferred to focus on violence and destruction, the most dedicated — in this sense «heroic» — participants knew that a revolution had to be creative to survive. They had to be unconventional in the creation of new conventions.

Two major English poets were especially known for their support of the French Revolution. Both wrote works, which interpreted the heroic role and thus created new ideas of heroes and heroism. However, they came to disagree profoundly both on with the consequences of the Revolution (in their day) and the meaning of heroes and heroism.

For purposes of simplification, there was a negative and a positive form of heroism. These were exemplified in the works of Byron (negative) and Shelley (positive).

Shelley introduced his positive hero by contrasting Prometheus with Satan, who was the hero of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In his introduction to the play *Prometheus Unbound* he wrote:

*The only imaginary being, resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgment, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement, which, in the hero of Paradise Lost, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs, and to excuse*

<sup>9</sup> CAMUS, 1955.

*the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling it engenders something worse. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends*<sup>10</sup>.

The hero imagined by Byron — today we still have the term «Byronic hero» — was very different. Although recognising that the conventional rules of behaviour were no longer adequate, the Byronic hero sees this as an individual error. In the end this error is incorrigible and can only bring death. The development of this conception of heroism can be seen in the four cantos of *Childe Harold*. In this narrative poem Byron effectively describes his transformation from an enthusiast of the Revolution to one who laments its failure and the defeat of Napoleon and finally resigns to death in the belief that the Revolution was futile, pointless, that nothing can be changed<sup>11</sup>.

Shelley completely opposes the view Byron espouses in the Canto IV.

*To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite; To forgive wrongs darker than death or night; To defy Power, which seems omnipotent; To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates From its own wreck the thing it contemplates; Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent; This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free; This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory*<sup>12</sup>.

5. A century ago another revolution shook and shocked the West — the October Revolution. It too was a signal of the crisis and an attempt to transcend it. Again the roles of heroism had to be reinterpreted. The reaction to the October Revolution was at least, if not more, violent (because of technological developments) than that triggered by the French Revolution.

The negative heroism (Byron) became violently opposed to the positive heroism (Shelley). Attempts to understand this conflict have been distorted by what can only be called a sloppy use of the terms and an even sloppier explanation of the forces and political entities involved. For example whereas the history of the period from 1917 until 1945 was seen as a collective struggle for socialism in Russia and wherever it was supported in the world on one hand, the alternative explanation has been that the struggle has been for individual liberty. Thus the hero in the West ostensibly fights against all forms of social control, which inhibit his individualism. The hero in the «East» on the other hand fights for the integrity of society and the strength of collectivity.

The principal theorists of what might call Byronic heroism in politics were Isaiah Berlin in Britain and Leo Strauss in the US<sup>13</sup>. The complement to this Byronic form of politics has

<sup>10</sup> SHELLEY, 1927: 201.

<sup>11</sup> BYRON, 1936: 173. For example, Stanza CV (Canto IV), *And from the planks, far shatter'd o'er rocks, / Built me a little bark of hope, once more / To battle with the ocean and the shocks / Of the loud breakers, ad the ceaseless roar / Which rushes on the solitary shore / Where all lies founder'd that was ever dear / But could I gather from the wave-worn store / Enough for my rude boat, where should I steer? / There woos no home, nor hope, or life, save what is here.*

<sup>12</sup> SHELLEY, 1927: 264.

<sup>13</sup> BERLIN, 1958. Leo Strauss was a German-American political philosopher and proponent of «natural law» doctrine, who while a professor at the University of Chicago has been credited as the intellectual mentor for what is called in the US «neo-conservatism». Although Berlin is often considered a «liberal» whereas Strauss is considered a conservative/reactionary, a principal historical motivation in both is their venomous reaction to the Russian Revolution.

been an economic doctrine called the Austrian School<sup>14</sup> but also neo-liberalism. There was a negative reaction to the French Revolution, which only saw violence and anarchy. And there was the negative reaction to the October Revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Strauss and Hitler were right in line in hating communism. So was Churchill. Berlin too. They hated the optimism and hope of the October Revolution. They had to worry about their own masses, who wanted to be free and to benefit from their own labour.

In fact, after 1945 it was still communism/socialism, which enjoyed the enthusiasm of most of the masses in Europe and rest of world. Contrary to the images created by Hollywood, most people in Europe knew that it was the Soviet Union that had defeated Hitler's empire and communists who had been the most disciplined resistance to fascism in the occupied territories. 70 years later the record is public how much money and political pressure the US had to devote to persuading Europeans not to vote for the optimism of the October Revolution<sup>15</sup>.

6. In 1989 the collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the so-called «socialist bloc», left the West with what might be called a «Byronic victory». Ostensibly this has been the triumph of the individual over all forms of collectivity/disparagingly called «collectivism». But what does that really mean? What is the actual end of Byron's notion of heroism and its derivatives «negative romanticism» and negative liberty?

7. The apparent victory of negative heroism has actually left us with the death of value. The hero's acts are violent, fervent and ultimately futile — and what is worse, he knows it and accepts the destruction as the price.

This was an answer by those for whom the revolutions had failed and although revolt may have been inevitable, in the end it was necessary to admit that «god was right», «monarchy was best» and «humans are incorrigible».

The consequences of this collapse could already be seen in the ascendancy of Austrian/neo-liberal economic doctrines beginning in the 1970s. This was coupled ironically with an abandonment of any pretence that democracy — in the sense of popular rule for the general welfare — was an acceptable social system. This is ironic because from 1945 until 1974, nearly the entire world was engaged in struggle to obtain the promises of democracy whether that inspired by 1789 or by 1917. Just when more countries became independent than at any time in history, democracy and a social state were abandoned as the primary model of political-social order. The hero in all of this was the entrepreneur or politician or even military officer who was willing to take the hard decisions needed to suppress popular, democratic aspirations for the sake of the supreme human objective of personal profit.

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<sup>14</sup> The Austrian School of economic dogma. Its most notorious contemporary propagandist was Milton Friedman. However Friedman was simply a populist acolyte of the economic theorists who were spawned in the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and after WWII found their home in the United States, many of whom gave birth to what was known as the «Chicago School» since it was spawned at the University of Chicago (along with a host of unsavoury German-speakers from north of the Salzach river).

<sup>15</sup> AGEE & WOLF, 1978. This is just one of several books/collections which drew attention to the covert operations of the US government to manipulate elections throughout Western Europe after World War II, principally to prevent popular European communist parties from winning elections.

Despite numerous economic crises, not to mention endless wars, there is still a widely propagated belief that the problems will be solved by more heroism, negative heroism that is. The heroes in our society are supposed to act deliberately against their own interests or against the interests of those they ostensibly represent. This is the Byronic heroism which if carefully analysed can be seen as the font of nihilism — not creativity or humanity. The Byronic hero has resigned to defeat, accepts the world as hopelessly corrupt and therefore the gods/potentates as the least possible evil. It is the heroism of suicide.

In fact many ordinary people resist this kind of heroism because it is obvious that it is a death wish.

The contrast to this heroism is positive heroism that for purposes of simplicity can be identified with Shelley — in particular, Shelley's reinterpretation of the Prometheus myth in his dramatic-lyric poem *Prometheus Unbound*. This enigmatic poem is a deliberate response to Byron's underlying nihilism. It poses the conflict between individualism and society as a pseudo-problem — one created by subservience to the gods. In other words he says that the game between god and man has been rigged and there is no way out except to stop playing on god's terms. It is god (the gods) who creates the conditions under which man is opposed to himself and to his fellow creatures. The individual that Byron described and supposed he lived was a product of his desire to be reconciled with authority to be happily submissive. Shelley's Prometheus refuses to play god's game. In doing so he becomes emblematic for the refusal to be divided and exploited by the gods.

Shelley's freedom is exactly Berlin's positive liberty — the ability to create one's own systems and structures or what is generally called in political science self-determination. Negative liberty, which Berlin from his sinecure at Oxford espoused as the only defensible form, is merely freedom with in a system one cannot change, as freedom to buy and sell in the free market or capitalism.

In Act IV, Shelley does not describe a utopia — a nowhere in which there is nothing to do and all questions are answered, all problems are solved. That is the usual opposition to the vision of Shelley and the positive Romantics or the committed revolutionaries of 1789 and 1917. Instead Shelley shifts from a drama in which Prometheus has had to deal with his oppressor and tormenter as punishment for bringing man fire (knowledge), to Prometheus as the emblem of all human potential when knowledge is attainable by all and can be used to live in the world. The meaning of the heart that grows back each time it is consumed is precisely the opposite of Byron's song of futility in *Childe Harold*. It is the heart — the love of man — that is renewed in the struggle to live and use the attainable knowledge. Prometheus has not sacrificed himself. It is not a Christian parable because Shelley's Prometheus is not a surrogate — he is everyman, unmediated in life itself and without god or any other tyrant to dominate him. Prometheus is not everyman as an individual. One ought perhaps to say Prometheus is only comprehensible as Man or Humanity. The liberal individual of the Enlightenment was the imitation of god, god the autocrat, the tyrant. Shelley believed that this individual was an insidious fiction — and for humanity a very destructive fiction.

From 1789 until 1918 the key social event for humanists was the French Revolution. From 1918 until 1989 the key social event was the October Revolution. The October Revo-

lution magnified the French Revolution to a global scale. 1989 can be seen as the final collapse of the French Revolution as the central ideal of what is paraded as «Western humanism».

Of course that does not mean that the ideals of the French Revolution and October Revolution were extinguished, only that the potential of Western states to promote humanism in whatever form collapsed.

One of the reasons for this collapse can be seen in the prevalence of what has been called «negative Romanticism» and its negative (nihilistic) hero. Nietzsche anticipated this, essentially arguing that the Byronic hero — the possessive individual (in the sense of defined by property, rather than humanity) — was a destructive ideal. In that sense Nietzsche did not promote fascism, as is often supposed — although his sister did — but prophesied its destructive power.

The October Revolution globalised the French Revolution and it was met by globalised fascism leading to the Second World War (this was an even more violent reaction than the wars against Napoleon). Although the Soviet Union, led by its own Napoleonic figure in the form of Stalin, was able to defeat the centre of European fascism, it was only at the cost of a kind of «Congress» solution in 1945 with NATO under US dominance emerging as the power to isolate the Soviet Union and prevent the expansion of the ideals of the October Revolution<sup>16</sup>.

WWII destroyed European control over its empires and ironically magnified the influence of the Soviet Union beyond its own ambitions for change in the world system. Thus from 1945 until 1975, revolutions continued to threaten the new «Congress» dispensation<sup>17</sup>.

By 1989 however the Soviet Union was exhausted and so were all the countries that had struggled to become independent based on the ideals of 1789 or 1917.

1989 marked what must unfortunately be seen both politically and economically but also socially and ecologically as the consequences of the «negative liberty», negative heroism, and above all the nihilistic response to the French Revolution — a return to divine despotism and clerical domination.

«Heroism» is by definition an act that violates convention, an error — at least in the eyes of those who feel compelled to follow conventional rules of behaviour. That heroism is an exception. So how can human society be organised «heroically» when that would mean constantly violating any conventions — any rules that might be agreed for the benefit of human life?

The hero as we have learned to appreciate him has always been a part of the deity — his violations were always within the confines of what the gods decreed — and priests interpreted.

For Shelley there were no gods. Prometheus joined the human condition, the human species. He took fire to share with humanity. He did not bring divine perfection — the gods

<sup>16</sup> See NSC-68, promulgated in 1947, this policy document defined the US national security strategy and objectives. It remained classified until the late 1970s.

<sup>17</sup> Of the three key US diplomats of the so-called Cold War era, Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, and Henry Kissinger, it is telling that Kissinger's academic focus was on the political order created by the reactionary Congress of Vienna, designed to suppress democratic and revolutionary movements after the defeat of Napoleon.

were never perfect either. Shelley's Prometheus was chained to the Earth like humans are as a species. In his view the renewing heart, is not a brief illusion.

However the potential of positive heroism has not been exhausted. It has merely lost its historical agents. Prometheus has had his heart consumed and now must bear its slow but sure replacement.

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