

The World-Historical Hero

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1

It was difficult to watch the world-historical hero, filmed in the brief days of his heyday. In the news reports and documentaries of the time, he has the bashfully pleased face of a man who knows he's doing good, by the world and by history, and who knows others know he is. He has, it seems, triumphed, over formidable odds. He has great reason to be pleased.

Yet it was so passing, his triumph, that it wasn't clear even then if he was really a hero. Doubts seemed to have been mooted from the beginning. Later, when the instinct for hero-worship had come and gone, inevitably, like hiccups or heartburn, it became clear that he was no hero, and perhaps had never been. He was, instead, a benighted and misguided parvenu, who should never have been offered so much cultural market share. He was, even, an embarrassment.

Not that it really mattered now. It's true that he might have been redeemed, at some especially prescient moment...but perhaps too prescient to have drawn the attention of the influencers of the day, or of the elite consensus of mysteriously endowed cognoscenti who somehow decided these things on behalf of everyone else. The advisory boards, the permanent academy, the perennial elders of the tribe who, as it happened, grew younger while the majority as surely aged.

The hero had a way of pronouncing standard, if weighty, words, not quite correctly; a hero's prerogative, perhaps. Foreign names were sometimes a problem. Perhaps his education was haphazard, his grasp of history, science and philosophy, brilliant but idiosyncratic. Yet the hero was articulate, and sometimes eloquent—if not quite enough, for the peers of the day. Is that why he hadn't quite made it, yet, into world-historical status? Should these things matter? How well could Napoleon ride a horse? Did he sometimes clumsily fall off it? Did Lincoln really stutter his way into history? No-one cared about those things, finally, in the face of what mattered.

What matters, we now know, is truth and boldness and the unrepentantly new. What matters is to shake off the ossified husk of the

obsolete, and plant vital seeds for the future. Everyone knew it then, too—the advisory boards, the academy members, the past laureates. How else had they risen to their positions of eminence? But still they had their reservations. They were willing to make way for the new, as long as certain proprieties were respected in the process. There was a certain good form to be observed. Even, be it said, an etiquette.

Or so they assumed. In the eighteenth-century, they would probably have been among those losing their heads, and not with them the unrepentantly new battle-cries of *Revolution!* Much the same surely held in those other glittering, glistening periods of great transition—with a midwinter fall of virgin snow under the starlight of the steppe, or with a sheen of blood along the shaft of a bayonet, or the curved blade of a sickle. Even the lowliest peasant, in those days, knew whose side history was really on.

Now, when history has grown so embattled (embittered?) by its own wearied age and the chicanery that has beset it, not even the people are quite clear what's going on. But the people *ought* to know, at least when they are—as they should be—properly informed. And there the would-be world-historical hero finds his niche at this late date along the timeline, obeys the hallowed script, so honed and polished, in their different ways, by all the world-historical heroes who have preceded him. It isn't really his fault if the time—as it has so often been—is out of joint. When has its chronic fracture ever been re-set, healed into woven bone? Is not his terrible burden precisely to show just how disjointed it has become?

His brief has obviously been to bring it home to the people just how little of this condition they really know. He's tried to bring them truth, hidden in plain sight, beneath all the guile and guises of the usual business of the world. It's not his job to make it right, but to expose the symptoms of wrong. If the people care for the common health, they'll take it upon themselves to diagnose the sickness and set about a cure.

Or so history, and the destiny of the hero, and the loyal members of the academy who later come to speak in its name, have always held it. Isn't it the same thing now? Or, if not, what has changed to betray it? Why, in other words, is the hero still not quite ennobled by the laurels of the elders, or the youngsters, or whoever they are now who decide these things? Is the hero a real contender for the crown, or just a pretender to it, a bounder, a boor, an also-ran? Who knows these things, who decides them in any case?

So it's probably inevitable that the would-be world-historical hero is required to spend inevitable periods of probation in some kind of halfway house—in a prison, more or less—while history dithers and dallies and tries to catch up with destiny, or its miscarriage, or something in-between. In

former cases of world-historical status this has been standard fare: a few spells in and out of legal custody, sometimes shorter, sometimes longer, have always been par for the course. Everyone, indeed, expects it—no less than the would-be hero himself. He's probably sensed it coming, even early on, though he's worked hard, as per the script, to avoid it.

2

Perhaps prison is just a way of pausing the cogs and cranks of change so that it doesn't happen too abruptly. Hero and captive both, then, a long-practised pair. The hero a captive of history (Napoleon on his island), which is itself at the mercy of the hero (Robespierre, sailing a sea of blood). And so it goes: Voltaire and his sacerdotal antagonists, Gandhi and the past-masters of Empire, Mandela and a wall of apartheid, Havel and the scourge of the all-seeing overseer—all of them imprisoned! Perhaps, the hero thinks—he has a lot of time to do this—you can't have the one without the other.

This seems, given the empirical record, to make some sense. But it's a trial, even a terror, that he feels deep in his shivered bones. Was it always meant to have been so hard, obdurate, obtuse? Who wrote the perennial, unvarying script, anyway? Isn't he meant to be making the conditions anew, he with his cohorts in civilisation's self-revision?

But what, he begins to think, if nothing, in the end, is really revised? Is it possible it's an illusion? Too much revision and you end up back where you began. And if, ultimately, little really changes (*plus ça change...*) then does this mean the battle of the world-historical hero is waged not so much against his captors, those on the supposed wrong side of history, but History itself? What if this intransigent imposter—so much older and longer-lived than any mere individual—is his real enemy?

The would-be hero, caught, in a maximum-security prison, by the wrong side of history, realises he faces his true campaign there. On the inside his work is cut out for him, and he has only to wait it out—wait out, that is, *the truth*. That has always been his business after all, the truth, hunting it to the end and blazing it forth in broadsides everywhere. In a way he's still in his element, even in a prison, and must only see out the gruelling process. He's kept in solitary confinement, where there's little to do *but* wait it out. Most of the twenty-four hours in a day he's left alone in a cell, to wrestle without relent with his invisible foe.

His face—of righteousness, of sacrifice—isn't seen so much now on the nightly news. He won't be breaking out of there soon, there are no plans

to oust him out by main force. Even the few noises of protest, made on his behalf, go largely ignored: both the *people*, the honest man and woman on the street, and the keepers of the highest laurels, the demi-gods in the world-assemblies, are impotent to hasten his eventual victory.

The would-be hero is not so well, and suffers often from chest-pains and fatigue. His heart races uncomfortably. He feels dizzy when he goes out into the exercise yard to do his only negligible exercise. In the prison, the food is adequate but unvarying. Worse, the would-be hero is often treated badly, rough-handled, and poorly tended to when he takes ill.

On the other hand, his visitors and supporters bring benign gifts. He regularly receives letters, fan-mail, photographs, items to be signed, confessions and all the proof of sentiment and devotion that leave him feeling a little nauseous. This isn't what he asked for, he can't dare say, this isn't what he needs. He needs solidarity in the real, not sentimental pap. He needs the stubborn force of resistance bending history to *its* will, its collective, novel power. They mean well, of course, the people; they go so far as to draw love-hearts on small folded pages of pink or gilded paper. Some of them smell of beautiful scents, from the most private rooms of the wealthiest houses.

Others have recorded messages, political tracts and rants, sepia-toned folk-songs from a time when history obeyed the script with dignity. They pen well-meant poems, and spiritual philosophies that are supposed, the would-be hero thinks, to imbue his harsh confinement with a higher edification. Some advise him to take up prayer or meditation, in his isolation, as all the great ones, the great souls, have done before him. He must seek unseen, metaphysical aid, that is sure, infallible, as so much merely human effort fails to be.

Oh god, when shall my redeemer cometh? he jokes, ironically, to his cell-walls, for he can't expect mercy from any saviour. Has he no true companions in his solitude? He likes to think, in his good hours, that eventually all will come good. That the agents of oppression will sooner or later come around to seeing their error. He can't be kept in there forever, after all. Sooner or later (when, when?), all the heroes are let loose again, to see their sacrifice vindicated. Isn't that how it works? he thinks, looking at the bars which, he's always read, in history-books and memoirs, are found high up on the cell-wall, too high to see out from, but which allow the faint warbling of those freest of beings, the birds of the ether, to relieve his tenebrous sequestration.

He can hear birds, it's true, but they could be coming from the guard-room TV, for all he can tell. He can hear loose strands of sometimes muffled, sometimes heightened, conversation, but it may be a bickering over cards, or

rations, not the vital signs of a moral order. There is a moral order, he's sure, beyond the bars of his cell-door, but it's unfortunately pressed like ill-fitting shoes into a rule-book written by civil-servants, not by the free and noble men and women of an enlightened polity.

Voltaire, indeed! he thinks, ruefully. Not much, old man, has really changed in nearly three-hundred years! The outer conditions, perhaps, props on the stage, but not the inner workings, the whys and wherefores of what goes on behind the curtain always ready to fall on a drawn-out second act. And the third—and fourth, if it too can be expected? And the genre of performance? What exactly is unfolding here, world-historically speaking? Is it possible nobody—himself included—knows? And will that be his blessing, or his undoing?

3

Under lock and key, the would-be hero is at the mercy of the state and its stubborn will to power—the very thing he's defied. On the outside, gutter press campaigns drag on their sordid ways, a thousand tall tales surround his name. The people lose sight of the first purpose of his heroism, and focus interest on peripheral concerns, trifles and trivia, gossip and innuendo. Is this why he's performed his great sacrifice, on their behalf no less—to provide the rabble with every scrap and ounce of untruth?

Has it been worth it—years of misadventure? Why suffer these slings and arrows if nothing good finally comes of it? Every day he spends at the mercy of mere winds of opinion, the more senseless the story grows. To save his sanity, he decides to leave the world to itself and its instinct for self-deception. Let it think what it chooses. If the people only knew how much of what they think is unchosen by them!—is, in truth, the will of history itself.

Patiently, the would-be hero waits it out: attempts, in fact, to out-wait the hand-servant of time, that roiling and rambunctious sea of human event. Vast waves of circumstance come and go: minor wars, a pandemic or two, fires, and floods. Governments fall, presidents topple, to be replaced by others that can only expect a like fate. He waits, as all his forebears in waiting have done, for the moment of redemption to come, as surely as all these other things. He doesn't know how it will come, but if it fails to, his destiny will have failed him also.

There are days when he's allowed official visitors, emissaries from the jury of the people, who weigh his and their own fate in their flighty hands. When will something give? he wants to ask, out loud, but knows this is a

private thought and that he can give nothing of his doubts away to the large and faceless nemesis, waiting outside the windows of his cell, in the cracks between doors and floors, in the corners of the dull, antiseptic walls.

On a number of occasions, a fellow-prisoner threatens him, with a view to gaining goods, when a guard's back is conveniently turned. Then he's cornered in a yard and shoved hard against a wall, his arm pushed up behind him. There's no obvious reason to explain it. When the fellow-prisoner is brought before a disciplinary committee, he confesses he doesn't know why he felt compelled to assault the would-be hero. "I didn't like the look of him", the convicted murderer says. "Something not trustworthy, in his face."

The irony is not lost on the would-be hero's defenders, who increasingly remark on his fortitude in the face of injustice, both inside and out of the prison. Is there nowhere a man of conscience can be safe from abuse? The hero himself begins to appreciate the periods of solitary confinement, which are at least times of peace—monastic, austere, but otherwise unmolested. In the long hours of solitude, he finds himself compelled to question his own actions. He wonders if he could have done it differently; that is, gone about his project of restitution without at the same time so alienating his enemy.

But an enemy is an enemy, and is not there to be appeased! If they've done wrong, they deserve to be exposed as malefactors. It isn't his fault if justice has failed its own imperative. Perhaps, he thinks, he could have refrained from humiliating the wrongdoers, who already have their own consciences to contend with. He could have been more compassionate, and even softened the guilt, by not, for example, revealing their names. And, for that matter, even his own. He could have been more discreet. He could have kept the worst for only that select few who can judge with absolute disinterest. That way blame might have been more evenly spread, and not heaped so abundantly, mercilessly, upon himself.

His legal case stretches beyond any reasonable expectation. Again and again, he's brought before one or another interim hearing, which merely reiterates the unproven charges brought against him, and assures those present that his case is nearing readiness, pending full investigation. But nothing really happens, he's kept isolated from all but his long-suffering legal representatives. Beyond the sporadic reports of events they recount to him, he grows more deprived of knowledge of the world outside, of what surrounds, in the public eye, the facts of his incarceration, which over the extended time have become less and less a matter of wide concern.

All but a few diehard advocates have quietly let go of the dispute, merely noting procedural events, drily devoid of commentary. Very many of

his former colleagues, in the business of publicising current affairs, let go of it altogether, its having lost an apparent newsworthiness. There are new crises, graver abuses, more egregious violations of one kind or another, that have supplanted his own, tired saga.

Then one evening the would-be hero is found slumped in the corner of his cell, not conscious, his pulse barely moving. Has he suffered permanent injury? He's taken, not so promptly, to the prison medical wing, where he's given aspirin, and beta-blockers, to slow his heart-rate. The would-be hero is put on a suite, a life-saving raft, of medications. A severe attack has been averted, but he must be kept on observation to monitor his recovery.

4

The would-be hero is by this time hidden from the eye of that temporal angel, dispatched to record all that transpires of the sublunary world. That is, history seems to have abandoned him. He's eventually released from the medical wing, but is fragile, tentative, unsure of how to go on. If the angel of truth has grown tardy, or recalcitrant, in his case, it has also been caught napping: he'd come close to dying.

His legal representatives enter into new but arcane waters, which require extended periods of—what? Consultation, preparation, research? Permissions, securities, authorisations? What exactly is the case? The language employed is endlessly inventive, generative, like a rabbit pulled out of so many legal wigs. Or is it, as many suspect, largely a *pas de deux ou trois* with a juridical process that intends, either wilfully or merely by haphazard, to prolong the case into perpetuity? But can world-historical imperatives really be so shambolic? It's not a question of intention, the suave pundits say, it's just *the nature of the beast*. What beast? others demand to know. The beast, they all fail to say, of the great judge of History.

By this time, indeed, all too many have grown inured to the stasis of resolving the world-historical status of the much-traduced, would-be hero. It's an *aporia*, the academics mutter, looking abashed. It's in the *too-hard basket*, the TV panel-members opine, with mild, guiltless frowns. In the end, neither judge nor jury, nor media pundit nor moral luminary, knows what to make of the case.

The would-be hero, for his part, has taken the advice long-ago offered him to cultivate a contemplative life. He's still unwell, and will probably remain so, and must avoid any emotional or mental exertion. Above all, he's advised to avoid all glimpses of the barometer of public pressure, pointed so

low on the scale of worldly concerns. He has no access to the online feeds and their wildly inconsistent moods, in any case. He spends much of his time immersed in private meditations, or reading guidebooks of a technical and esoteric—strictly non-political—kind. He eats little and moves around only when he's taken into the common yard which he shares, peaceably enough now, with his fellow prisoners. He's been there so long that his captors even allow him to grow his beard and hair, to prophetic lengths, à la Methuselah.

As he speaks little, so as to not agitate his heart, and tries to smile rather than speak, he's thought of as harmless, one of those largely forgotten by the system. No-one even really notices when, one mid-morning in the early spring, he's released on something like a good behaviour bond, by means of a technical loophole in his prosecution. He has, it seems, finally been tamed. He's assured that if he desists in his former incautious assaults on the truth, then there'll be no need for curbing his liberty. He will, like the man in the street, be able to walk freely to pursue his own affairs.

Others, however, know that the termination of his custody is due more to consideration of his state of health: the prison and legal authorities would prefer to avoid his expiring on their watch. Few ask after him, in the library or the canteen, where he's had only passing friends—some of whom have actually died before him. He's gone as obscurely as he'd arrived. And on the outside, in the world, where the would-be world-historical hero has been relegated to the margins of the main-stage action—there's a new war brewing, another martyr for the cause of planetary rescue, another impeachment of another inept president—the hero finds he's lost much of his former interest in exposing the duplicity and deceit of his former enemies.

He's rather interested in horticulture, and homeopathy. He tells his handful of loyal advisors that he might go into small-scale production—not-for-profit, to be sure. But history, with or without a capital H, seems at the last minute to have caught up with its over-burdened schedule, and a trickle of minor awards, low-key notices of recognition, come knocking at his virtual door—the door he'd had before he had, for so many, too many years, only a cell-door. He's invited to fabled cities, in foreign snowbound countries, his presence requested at one or another high-toned proceeding. Suddenly, like a building avalanche of attention, there are gala dinners, illustrious panels of speakers, fine liquors and food provided—and all expenses, naturally, paid.

He's asked to say a few words, to provide a preface, here and there, but only so much as it won't compromise his understandably fragile health. How could he have survived, they remark, so many years of incarceration? And what is worse, so long a trial of neglect, the people offering only dismissiveness or indifference, the passing powers of government doing so

little to relieve his plight? But the hero, his patrons say, kept true to his ideals, to the perennial program of progress. Civilisation, they judge, is the better for his efforts. For this reason, they announce, he's to be awarded one of the most hallowed of all prizes, in which he joins a long and illustrious line of forebears. Would he be able to grace the assembly of the academy with his rare presence? All assistance will, of course, be brought to bear.

The would-be hero who, it would seem, has finally been given cause to see himself, as others now see him, as bona fide, enlisted in the history books as fully world-historical, is not immediately available for comment. It appears he can't be reached, or has left his phone off the hook, or has turned it to silent, or has gone offline, or is otherwise indisposed. When his most stalwart spokesperson is finally located, working pro bono for human rights litigants in a developing but unnamed country, a response is promised as soon as it can be secured.

The members of the assembly wait, hands crossed, in all respectful patience. No more calls or notices are made, and they see fit to allow the world-historical hero his long-earned right of reply, or deferral, whichever it might be.

When word finally comes, it's in the form of a call made from a cell-phone in a heavily crowded and noisy marketplace—for all anyone knows, it could be in Djibouti, or the backblocks of Dhaka. Wherever it is, an accented voice is heard to say something, of which only a single word can be made out. But the more they try to distinguish just what word it is, the less certain they are in deciding whether it is *resigned* or *retired*.