

# THE HERO IN LITERATURE

by Paul Zweig

WE STILL CALL the principle characters in books “heroes,” although this has become a sort of joke, since in our day the heroes rarely have anything risky or noble to accomplish. On the contrary, they are so ordinary, so tentative, that we have coined the expression “anti-hero” to describe them. Our greatest modern stories are written about characters like Stephen Dedalus, in *Ulysses*, or Marcel, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, who want to write books but can’t; or the woman in Beckett’s *Happy Days*, who is buried to her neck in sand. We are fascinated by Conrad’s haunted Lord Jim, who “saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane . . . always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book.” If Jim had actually done any of these things, we might read about him in some bloodcurdling boys’ tale by Robert Louis Stevenson. But when the moment comes for Jim to be a hero, he cannot act; he is paralyzed and spends his life brooding on his lost moment.

Take another famous example. Kafka’s castle stands on top of a misty hill, but the hero who is trying to reach it—he doesn’t even have a name, only a letter, K.—never will, for K. is the victim of forces beyond his control. Unlike the knights of medieval romance who pried their way into castles to stir up trouble and make a name for themselves, the K. of Kafka’s story flails about in a maze of rules and restrictions. He gets nowhere, and that is where we join him: in a bemused limbo, a sort of no-exit world which, we are made to understand, is the very one we live in.

Our modern “hero” today becomes interesting when his dreams are punctured, and his stark limitations—

known to us as the “human condition”—begin to strangle him a little. The failure of the dream is one of the great subjects of the novel, from Stendhal’s youthful Julien Sorel, in *The Red and the Black*, to Flaubert’s icy dreamer, Madame Bovary, to the gaspingly claustrophobic, pain-greedy character of Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened*, whose life collapses before our eyes over hundreds of pages of perversely eloquent internal posturing.

Certain emotions are apparently no longer available to us in literature, and not very much outside of it either: awe, tremendous admiration, the sort of feeling one gets for a truly great human being who touches our lives. For the most part we wade about in a debris of failed hopes. The literature of our century reflects this, or perhaps it taught it to us. In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennet argues that we have lost our cultural feeling for public actions, and replaced it with a mystical conviction that actions of the mind, internal movements that surge out of control in the “free” space of the psyche, are the only real actions. This represents the ultimate democracy, for everyone, even the most spineless of us, has a mind. And so we are all real, and don’t have to do anything strenuous to prove it. But the hero is a public man, if he is anything. He is made not only of muscle and courage, but of values. He is a moral warrior who defends us against our own helplessness.

The heroic ideal has slowly declined since the Age of Pericles, when the *Iliad* was the Athenians’ Bible. Plato, our first social theorist, banished Homer from his ideal Republic, because heroes like Achilles and Odysseus could never fit into a community of sensible people. As heroes, they lived by their swords, and their wild emotions. They tested

the limits of man petulantly because they were themselves only partly human. (The other part was god, devil, or magician.) Yet the Athenians loved the extravagant claims of their heroes because, despite the vaunted rationality of the Greeks, they suspected that life’s “secrets” had to be wrested from the concealing gods, like a Golden Fleece, or the Apples of the Hesperides. Only a hero could do it. Heroes were counter-gods; they were the true philosophers, because they found out what things meant, and brought back magnificent stories to spread the word.

And in the end, it is Plato’s judgment that has won out. When the Roman poet Virgil wrote his heroic poem, *The Aeneid*, he portrayed Aeneas transforming himself from a passionate warrior into a good gray citizen. Thirteen hundred years later, in *The Divine Comedy*, Dante descending into the Inferno is a remarkably passive sort of hero, more like a voyeur in hell. By the 16th and 17th centuries, heroes had become comic figures, like Don Quixote.

During the Age of Exploration, men like Columbus, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Captain Cook undertook journeys that made Odysseus look like a tourist, yet they never became true culture-heroes. Nor did Europe’s interminable wars produce any enduring heroic myth. The greatest travel story of modern times, *Robinson Crusoe*, is about a terrified ordinary man who loathes risk and spends his life building insanely complicated walls to shield him from a menace that may not even exist. Crusoe is so unadventurous that in 28 years on his solitary island, he doesn’t even explore every part of it.

Instead of the impulsive rushing about of “heroes,” we have come to admire the talkative leisurely lives por-

The Standard of Giving.



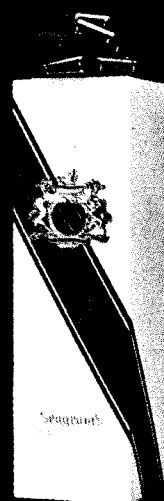
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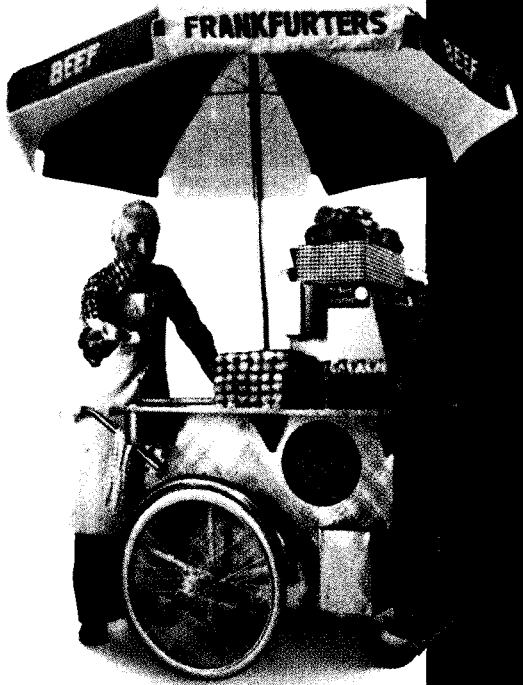
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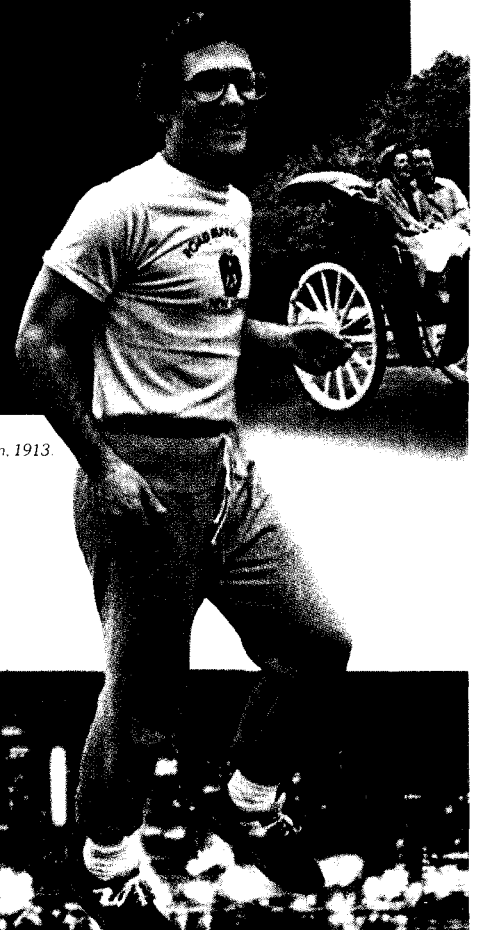


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trayed by Jane Austen, or the self-afflicting mania of the characters in Dostoyevski. We want to know the hidden things that seep out when baffled, struggling men and women reveal more of themselves than they know, as in the cruelly decorous world of Henry James or in the recent fiction of, say, John Cheever. We are excited by this close-up view of "secret" lives, provided by the snooping sensibility of the novelist, for he reveals what is going on in people's hearts.

Who was it that said no man is a hero to his valet? Or, for that matter, to his wife, his children, his close friends—to anyone who has learned to know him in his flesh and private feelings. In our great literature, it is the valet's point of view that has won out. The important innovations of modern literature—stream of consciousness, fragmented time sequences, dream-narratives—take us to the antipodes of the life of action, into unfiltered wordy dramas of the mind.

WHICH IS not to say that the contemporary world does not have its "heroes." For I doubt that human beings can live without some expanded ideal of behavior, some palpable image of the spaciousness of man. We want to know that our personal limitations are only a special case, that somewhere there is someone who can translate his words, thoughts, and beliefs into acts, even if we can't. Heroes in this sense represent a profoundly humanistic ideal. It says a great deal about our cultural moment, therefore, that we should have squeezed our heroes into the cultural badlands of popular literature, genre movies, and television serials. Here is where we find the Lord Jims who leap into action when the emergency arises. They are muscular, lithe; they know right from wrong; they also know who they are, and this gives them a lacquered, mineral aspect.

But what sort of heroes are they? Like the heroes in Homer, they are larger than life; they gleam with physical exuberance; their courage and good intentions emanate from them like a visible aura. But today these very characteristics somehow disqualify them as serious exemplars of what man can do; they seem like caricatures, a sort of comic relief or grotesque mummery between acts of the weightier drama of real life. These popular heroes have no maze of inner qualities that seep into their talk and gestures, through gaps of hesitation, of failure. As a result they strike us as partial figures, a sort of half-men who give us a

playful kind of pleasure. This is what we mean when we call such stories escapist. They remove us from ourselves too neatly, too lightheartedly, leaving no residue of reflection by which these enlarged personages can become alternative lives for us.

In her recent book, *The Last Cowboy*, Jane Kramer writes about a Texas cowboy who goes to see John Wayne westerns to find a life he could be happy with. Wayne's world of fists and bullets is his idea of a proper world where a man can make himself felt. Yet according to Kramer, this cowboy who attempts to model his life on a hero in the movies is a desperately sad case, and most of us would agree. For John Wayne's movie world doesn't apply to a modern cowboy any more than it does to us. Kramer's cowboy is taking the mummery between the acts for the play itself, and he is making a touching fool of himself.

The truth is that these larger-than-life heroes of popular entertainment aren't heroes at all in the old sense. They are not invitations to grandeur, as Odysseus was to the lords of Mycenae, but a sort of hide-and-seek we play with our lives. By losing ourselves in their overtly worlds of right and wrong, courage and death, we leap sideways out of time and responsibility into a sideshow of brazen grotesques: a jerky miniature version of the spacious alternatives offered by Odysseus and his heroic kin.

HAVING SAID this, I would like to take at least some of it back, for it would be wrong to underestimate the complex attraction of popular culture, its function as a seedbed for attitudes that often have a long and rich life in the larger culture. It is by now a commonplace to recognize the roots in popular entertainment of Balzac, Dickens, and even Dostoyevski. The rampant popularity of the most forgettable Gothic tales of the late 18th century later influenced writers like Poe, Melville, Conrad, Sartre, and Beckett.

In our own day, writers like Vonnegut and Pynchon draw on the cardboard heroes of popular adventure literature to create their comedies of modern life. Norman Mailer, too, in all the phases of his career, has taken a kind of heroic template from popular storytelling, and transferred it, with only the barest trace of irony, into the sultry, garrulous, existential atmosphere of his novels. *The Naked and the Dead*, *The American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam* strain to create characters who are both men of action and moody failure-bound anti-heroes. The

contradiction is, I think, the key to Mailer's distinctiveness as a novelist.

There is in cultural history a "displacement upwards" of popular forms and ideas from folklore, religious superstition, popular theater, and storytelling, to the enduring creations of Homer, Sophocles, Dante, and our best modern writers.

We must acknowledge, therefore, that a phantasmagoria of heroes parades across our lives after all: rock stars magnified by stupendous lightshows and banks of loudspeakers; athletes purified to a lean, entrancing skill made magical by the huge sums of money they earn; transatlantic balloonists; mountain climbers; solitary around-the-world sailors, like Sir Francis Chichester; Philippe Petit, who crossed between the towers of the World Trade Center in New York on a wire last year. And, of course, the Kojaks and Baretts, not to mention the crude anonymous heroes of violent films: the karate masters, the black glittering giants of blackploitation films. On all sides, these larger- and simpler-than-life figures are at play, and their play hypnotizes us.

Perhaps it is the idea of play that is important here. We tend to admire acts that are magnificently useless, risks taken for their own sake. Because the "serious" world is desperately unheroic; because we are all equal and, therefore, cramped in our mind's perspective; because failure and intimacy take up so much room in our sense of ourselves, we squint sideways into a circus fairway of ballooning figures who are free, lighter than air in their lovely futility. We don't have any *Odyssey* or *Beowulf* or even *Moby Dick*. But we have the trivial playfulness of the heroes of popular entertainment; we have the garish extravagant rock and movie worlds; we have gladiatorial sports in which no one dies; we have playful killer-lovers like James Bond. All of this amounts to more than bad taste, and less than great, or even good, art. The historian Johan Huizinga has argued that man is an essentially playful animal, who plays the game of law, of war, of love, of thought; who sports even when he is mired in seriousness. If that is so, then these play-heroes of popular culture, crude and repetitious as they may be, remind us with an unexpected realism of who we are, and what we do. ●

Paul Zweig is chairman of the comparative literature department at Queens College. He is author of *The Adventurer*, *Three Journeys: An Automythology*, and several books of poetry.

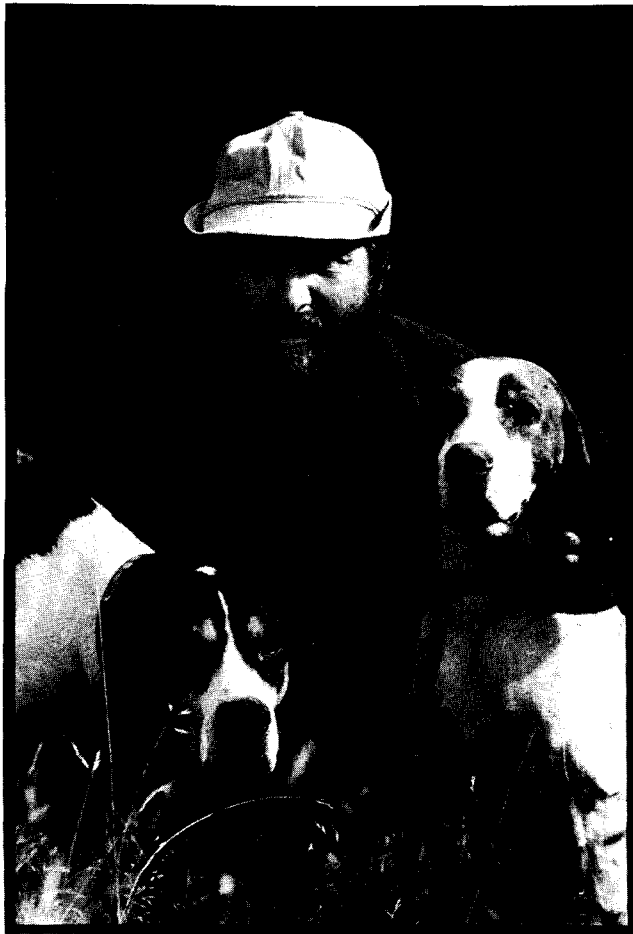
## CURRENTS

# Stalking the Black Bear

by Jonathan Evan Maslow

*We were anxious to procure as much sport as possible, and having observed one of the bears, which from its size we conjectured to be the mother of the two cubs just killed, we ordered the Negroes to cut down the tree on which it was perched, when it was intended the dogs should have a tug with it, while we should support them, and assist in preventing the bear from escaping by wounding it in one of the hindlegs.*

—John James Audubon



Don Helstrom and helpers—hunting “Some mean sons o’ whores.”

IT WAS COMMON in the 19th century to believe that God created man as a kind of junior partner to help rule the lower orders, and that hunting was as much a part of that responsibility as it was a right and a joy. But ever since the rise of antihunting lobbies, the airing of the television documentary *Guns of Autumn*, and the relegation of hunting largely to the less articulate, less activist lower middle and working classes, hunting for sport has suffered a near total collapse of public image. To the average contemporary city dweller or suburbanite, who associates guns with street crime and whose table meat arrives superbly packaged, the word hunting is likely to con-

jure up a vision of beer-guzzling killers who blast away at Bambi with automatic weapons.

Set against this view of unnecessary and inhumane slaughter of helpless and endangered wildlife is a very recent, pristine, and highly moralistic vision of benign nature: the peaceable kingdom, minus, perhaps, gnats, rodents, and poisonous snakes. Having laid waste the wilderness, skunked the waterways with toxics, and decimated animal and Indian alike in the name of economic development, we now indulge ourselves in an orgy of sentimentalism for whatever comes labeled “natural.” The result is a movement aimed not at the restoration of the actual, amoral state of nature but of a childlike innocence, something like the American Dream before it got complicated and nerve-wracking.

In almost every state, the hunting issue rages. Political pressure is brought to bear against sport hunting, a spillover of the legitimate and worthy condemnation of whale and baby seal hunting. By the same token, the lunatic fringe of hunters longs for an equally simplistic world, where, as the bumper stickers say, “Guns made our country great.”

It can be demonstrated that the greatest damage done to North American wildlife came from the relentless elimination of the wilderness habitat—the clearing of the midwestern plains for grain farming; the fencing of the Southwest for range; 19th-century commercial hunting; and, in our own time, the creep of suburbs into rural regions. It can also be convincingly argued that sport hunting does not at present jeopardize a single species; in fact, that regulated hunting, in conjunction with scientific wildlife management, has actually promoted the ideals of conservation, and has restored a semblance of ecological balance to the surviving fauna. The salvation of waterfowl through the 1929 Federal Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and the increase in healthy whitetail-deer herds and black-bear populations, are two examples of sport hunters and wildlife bureaucrats’ combining for the mutual benefit of sportsmen and wildlife.

Yet any discussion of hunting moves rapidly off the trail of reason into the dense undergrowth of the emotions; and prominent among the passions of antihunters is a dark dread of the game animal’s imagined pain, suffering, and death. Ortega y Gasset believed that in hunting men rehearse their own death, and if so, the modern aversion to hunting evinces our intolerance for the one experience that continues to elude all understanding, our own elimination.

As it happens, I spent the autumn in Maine, where death is an everyday occurrence. From plopping live lobsters into steaming water, to the house cat’s morning entrance with the still-warm hermit thrush dangling from its mouth, to the occasional bull moose ramming the pickup truck, and the