

# the new hero

screed

a return to myth

sir gawain & the  
green knight/  
a synopticon on the  
marxist/artist/christian/  
cowboy as hero/marvel  
comics/bonnie  
& clyde

number one 1968

Who is the new hero?

No age has ever been bereft of its heroes.

The semi-divine warrior, the chivalrous knight,  
the enlightened despot, the freedom fighter, the  
savior of the proletariat, the  
fiercely existential man,

have all seen their day of eminence arrive and disappear.

NONE

of these paragons seem

RELEVANT TO US NOW.

College students, when asked by pollsters of the last generation,  
declare they have no heroes. Perhaps they see the inherent paradox  
in the maniacal quest during the early twentieth century  
for the man-made

SUPER-HERO.

But the hero cannot so easily be denied admittance to the future.

He is designed to be durable.

In recent generations man has secretly atoned for the fact that  
he has no feel for heroism, that he has never in his lifetime recognized heroism  
except as a vague metaphor within  
an unalterably mundane existence.

Yet even as a misdirected metaphor it has some significance for him—

we persistently return  
to visions of heroism in our society  
because  
**THE HERO IS NECESSARY.**

**Man must have an image of himself which is not purely subjective,**

which exists outside  
each individual as a common assent to something real in human nature.  
He must have images of greatness.

His metaphors should reveal a vast scheme  
in which the highest possibilities of human endeavor can be realized.

Heroism is not merely a concept. It is one of those "great ideas" which a people  
unconsciously hold and which they express in their living and their dying.

At bottom, the heroic testifies that

**SOME THINGS ARE SACRED.**

The past few generations of secularism have never wholly accepted  
the proffered model of comfort and security.

Something in the blood

**WITHSTANDS**

the inevitable descent into mediocrity.

Unknowingly,

people summon up a whole heritage of heroic virtue each time they concede praise  
to a truly excellent man, acknowledging that to call a hero

a HERO

still means something.

# A HERO IS

what we make of him.

That is, his heroic essence is not revealed in his deeds, but in the memory of them.

Such memory may be recounted by a whole people through its songs and sagas,  
or it may be cast and given final form in the solitary retelling of the poet.

It may be accurate or exaggerated,

for what matters is not so much that one man does a heroic deed  
as that he exemplifies its doing to others. The hero cannot exist in the factual order  
alone; it is only in the imagination that his nature is fulfilled.

The great man is elevated in the memory

until finally

he becomes

an  
archetype  
of human  
grandeur.

THE HERO GIVES  
THE SUBSTANCE

to a particular cultural belief.

Without him "truth," "courage," "selflessness" are all abstract concepts  
standing apart from the world of human action.

By conjuring cultural images of heroism through the imagination,  
the members of a society can recognize

a part of their human responsibility to live the heroic life themselves,  
to participate in the heroic awareness of high human endeavor and ultimate death.

Each great culture in the West  
has given its own matchless expression of the heroic virtues,  
and our inheritance, coming to us through DNA and a pastiche of poetry,  
is a complex cumulative image.

The Greeks,  
who believed most unapologetically in the hero,  
accepted the organization of the heroic virtues in Homer's Iliad,  
which was taught as basic education to all young men  
and shaped their conception of manhood.

In the figure of Achilles the virtue of **honor** is asserted to be at the core of any heroic existence. Achilles' action in the Iliad demonstrates that honor is not what the hero strives after; rather it is, like any of the heroic virtues, that quality which the hero embodies from the beginning, an ineradicable part of his humanness. Achilles' actions stem from his sense of honor; his living is permeated with it. At the beginning of his heroic life, Achilles is given by the gods two alternatives for life:

a long but mediocre existence, or  
a glorious but early death.

His choice is made not from the desire for glory, as some critics have said, for even with glory he assumes unto himself also a burdensome awareness of death. Far beyond his desire for personal acclaim is the knowledge born out of his godlike virtue: to choose anything less than the greatest human achievement possible to him, to desire anything lower than what would fulfill his greatness, would be dishonorable. Death must be accepted; but the important thing is that **a man be all that he is meant to be**. This knowledge comes from vision, which orders things in the light of their ultimate fulfillment; and in responding to the divine call **TO BE**, Achilles is representative of the norms ordained for society by the gods.

But honor has negative manifestations: an honorable person must act so that his inward knowledge of himself is not defiled in any way. It is for this reason that Achilles withdraws from battle after the insult by Agamemnon. Even the possibility of the defeat of the Achaeans means nothing in comparison with a life of shame, for with his shame the whole vision of community among men, under divine sanction, would crumble. He rebuffs Agamemnon, who in his ambition feels that **the law** must have priority over an intuitive sense of integrity, and he refuses to fight simply because he knows that honor commits him to restore the favor of the gods or else renounce his glory.

He leaves only at the command of the gods: for if the choice were his, he would continue to defend his city, now defeated and in flames. But dutifully he takes up his father Anchises on his back, scrambles to pack up all the household gods, then goes estranged from his ancestral home to answer some tuture that he has been told is his.

Though the effort must have certainly seemed dubious, he never disclosed either distrust or fear for his survival.

Aeneas is told to plant his people somewhere, to found a city, and thus to maintain the heritage of his forefathers according to the divine mandates.

What his heroism involves, then, is something quite different from that of Achilles. The Greek hero has served first the imperatives of his integrity, his sense of rightness; and his devotion to the gods and to the Achaeans come from this initial self dedication.

But Aeneas is motivated from the beginning through his awareness of **THE OTHER**; and to accomplish his heroic task he must again and again suppress his personal desires. Dido is abandoned regardless of any passion he may have for her or she for him. She is the victim of his ascetic devotion to heroic goals. He, to her dismay, has the heroic virtue of **PIETAS**, a reverence toward one's ancestors and to the gods.

From  
the  
falling ramparts of TROY  
we see AENEAS fleeing.

From his fathers he expects to acquire many generations' worth of human wisdom. And as he earns the inherited knowledge of the past through his ordeals, he will achieve his name—his identity as a man and his hope for perpetuation in time.

And through the past he revives the wealth of custom and ritual which together compose a full image of communal man which he should employ in founding a city of the first magnitude. Aeneas' reverence—  
TO THE GODS THROUGH HIS  
PIETAS,——

allows him to see all his actions within a divine scheme, to establish the earthly city with a gods' model of a city: to possess the comfort and the sanction of his own destinies.

#### PIETAS

makes imperative the complex burden of the city: to build into the communal models the presence of the past and a sense of destiny, the presence of the future



The Greco-Roman tradition, then, has given us these central images of the hero, which have for centuries been normative in the Western world and spirit. Achilles and Aeneas are our classical figures of the hero, and the heritage we have from them has survived through centuries to take on new forms among different peoples.

Another expressly pagan and non-classical virtue which is part of our literary inheritance comes from a culture very distant from that of Greece or Rome. This is the virtue of *comitatus*, present in Germanic sagas and heroic poems as a focal point for all of a man's deeds. *Comitatus* is the loyalty to a bond of service and fellowship which exists between a lord and his warrior. Like honor and *pietas*, this, too, is a communal virtue—that is, one which all members of the community are called to embody. Yet in Germanic literature we see a greater emphasis on the necessity of all men to be virtuous. For in the Germanic poetry, most specifically in the epic *Beowulf*, there are two large metaphors for human endeavor: on the one hand is the "mead hall" where a man has companionship with his fellow warriors and participates in the activity of the tribe; and on the other hand, the battlefield, where a man consummates his tribal activity. He feeds the battle, the defense of his family and lord, with all of his manly strength. This fierce loyalty is heroic, for through it the warrior is sworn to fight to the death, to act in self-abandon to protect the communal possessions of the tribe. Thus we see that a man who betrays the bonds of *comitatus*, or one who, like the speaker in the Old English poem, *The Wanderer*, is bereft of his lord and his tribe, is perpetually in exile and can find no comfort. For without the common enterprise which *comitatus* represents, life is simply without meaning; it becomes merely a series of hardships which one must endure. No man can truly exist without this virtue. As we see in the figure of *Beowulf*, the image of the hero finally is the lord, who stands above the other men in strength and courage. The young *Beowulf* goes among the Danes, not through any real obligation to them but because the call for succor has come to him from his kinsman. He slays Grendel and his mother, removing the threat of harm from this people and knowingly placing a curse upon his own head in behalf of them. And in this feat, he acts

wholly without regard for himself. Among his own people, the lord is not only of greater courage than his men, but, more deeply, the lord must be more fully aware than anyone else of the bonds that make a tribe. He returns the loyalty that his men give him, and with more integrity than any of them might be capable of. The lord is fully aware of his obligation, but in addition to this he must assume—because the fate of the tribe depends on it—that the bond of *comitatus* is as deeply felt in his warriors as it is in himself. Thus when the aged lord *Beowulf* faces the dragon with only the steadfast *Wiglaf* to aid him after his other warriors have fled, we hear only—

Another non-classical virtue which is also a part of the Judaeo-Christian heritage is the Hebrew virtue of righteousness, that sense of sacredness which the chosen of God possess. The righteous man not only maintains his own holiness by living within the life of Yahweh, but in addition to this the truly righteous man will not allow the profane world to remain profane: he feels called upon to sacralize the profane according to the will of the Lord. This is truly an heroic endeavor: for in attempting to do it the man must commit himself not only to the possibility of his actual death within a hostile world, but even more he must make the ultimate choice for self-death in the act of service. The Hebrew virtue of righteousness is present from the beginning in all different genres of the Old Testament, even though it is elaborated fully only in the later Wisdom literature. From the historical sagas

of the Bible the figure of David reveals the virtue of righteousness. He has a practical mission. He is chosen to establish the Kingdom of Israel in the world. David has a great part in the creation of Israel through his conquest, his action as a warrior. Yet he knows that his heroic courage and strength come to him only through faith. As great a figure as he is, still he builds for the glory of the Lord and realizes that his action is but a part of the greater design of Yahweh. David's action as a hero is to sacralize what is profane, to change Canaan, the promised land, into a consecrated nation. In a different way the Hebrew prophet has the same role. He shapes his people and works toward a spiritual city through his service to the Word. He revives his people's consciousness of history and forces them to perceive the import of their communal symbols and rituals. His call is to maintain the sacred order against profanation of the communal imagination. Most essentially it comes out of the knowledge of the chosen people that the whole endeavor of a man's life must not be separated from his life in God. From Abraham to Jeremiah the same awareness manifests itself: **THOSE WHO CARRY THE WORD OF THE LORD MUST SPARE NO QUARTER.**

The Classical, Christian, and Germanic traditions of heroism meet in later medieval literature.

The Song of Roland

for instance combines a Germanic and Christian Charlemagne with the classical ideals of the Romans.

Most important for our understanding of medieval heroic ideals however is the vast

Arthurian literature. International in scope, metaphysical mystical and symbolic in method, and political social and religious

in import, it scans the horizons of beliefs and institutions in the Middle Ages.

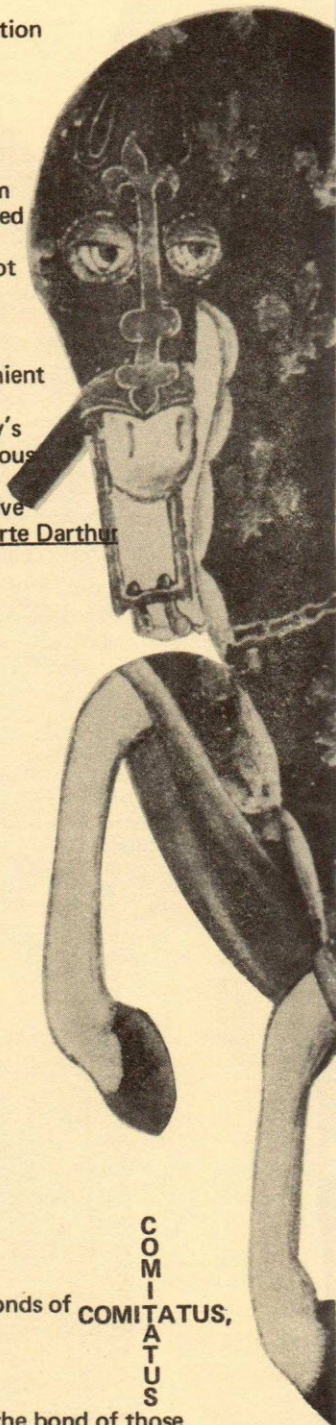
The masterpiece of the English Arthurian poems is

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Though it assumes a knowledge of the

many stories of the Round Table, the poem is a summation of the unique brand of heroism practiced at Camelot which is

more convenient than Malory's enormous prose narrative Le Morte Darthur



THAT BEOWULF MUST DIE,

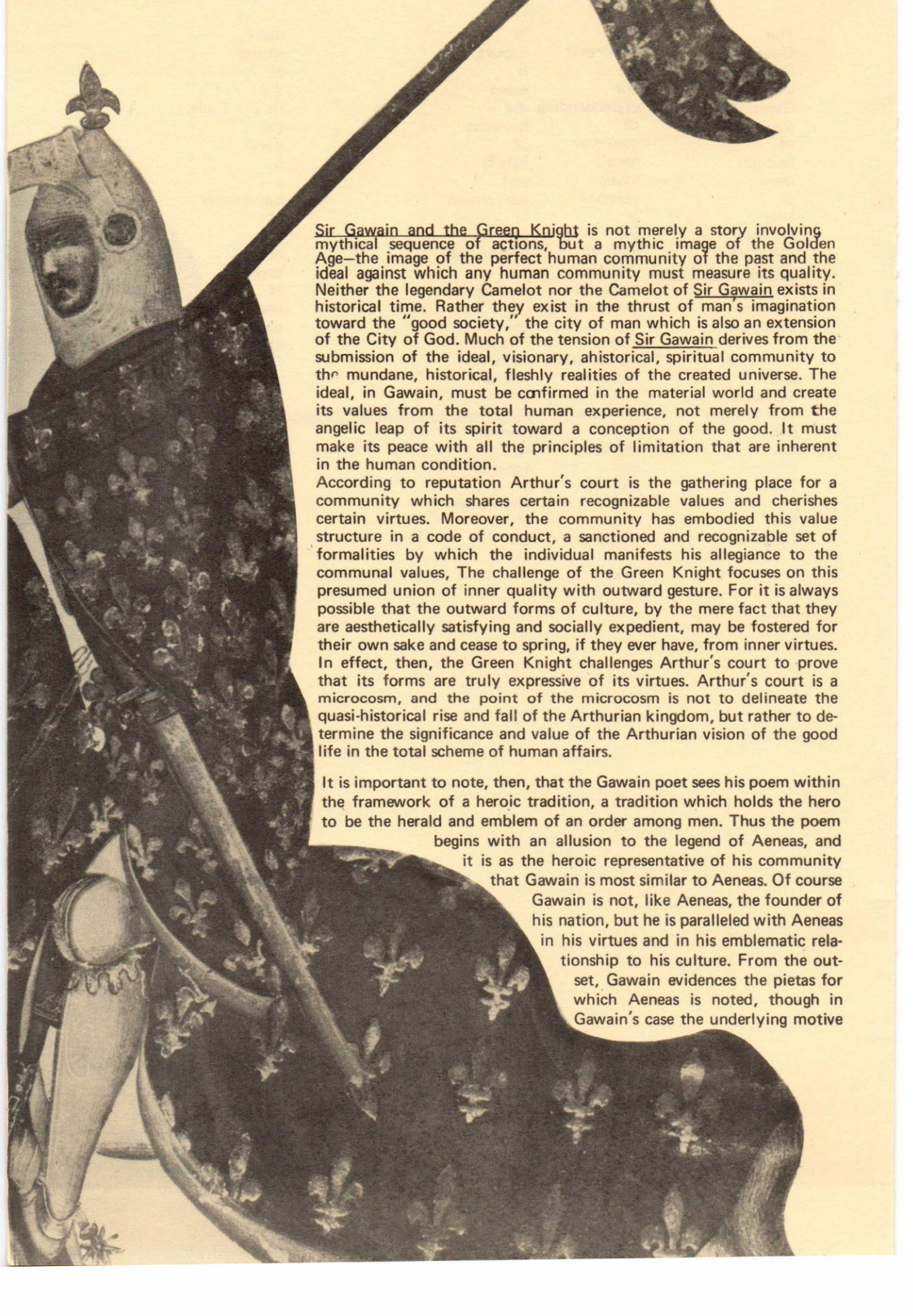
and his people, having broken irrevocably the bonds of

COMITATUS,

are doomed in his death.

COMITATUS

Comitatus, then, the bond of those engaged in a common enterprise, is necessary if causes are to be durable.



Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not merely a story involving mythical sequence of actions, but a mythic image of the Golden Age—the image of the perfect human community of the past and the ideal against which any human community must measure its quality. Neither the legendary Camelot nor the Camelot of Sir Gawain exists in historical time. Rather they exist in the thrust of man's imagination toward the "good society," the city of man which is also an extension of the City of God. Much of the tension of Sir Gawain derives from the submission of the ideal, visionary, ahistorical, spiritual community to the mundane, historical, fleshly realities of the created universe. The ideal, in Gawain, must be confirmed in the material world and create its values from the total human experience, not merely from the angelic leap of its spirit toward a conception of the good. It must make its peace with all the principles of limitation that are inherent in the human condition.

According to reputation Arthur's court is the gathering place for a community which shares certain recognizable values and cherishes certain virtues. Moreover, the community has embodied this value structure in a code of conduct, a sanctioned and recognizable set of formalities by which the individual manifests his allegiance to the communal values. The challenge of the Green Knight focuses on this presumed union of inner quality with outward gesture. For it is always possible that the outward forms of culture, by the mere fact that they are aesthetically satisfying and socially expedient, may be fostered for their own sake and cease to spring, if they ever have, from inner virtues. In effect, then, the Green Knight challenges Arthur's court to prove that its forms are truly expressive of its virtues. Arthur's court is a microcosm, and the point of the microcosm is not to delineate the quasi-historical rise and fall of the Arthurian kingdom, but rather to determine the significance and value of the Arthurian vision of the good life in the total scheme of human affairs.

It is important to note, then, that the Gawain poet sees his poem within the framework of a heroic tradition, a tradition which holds the hero to be the herald and emblem of an order among men. Thus the poem begins with an allusion to the legend of Aeneas, and

it is as the heroic representative of his community that Gawain is most similar to Aeneas. Of course

Gawain is not, like Aeneas, the founder of his nation, but he is paralleled with Aeneas in his virtues and in his emblematic relationship to his culture. From the outset, Gawain evidences the pietas for which Aeneas is noted, though in Gawain's case the underlying motive



is religious rather than humanistic or nationalistic. Aeneas' reverence for the integrity of material goods, his loyalty to and respect for his father as the representative of familial bonds, his careful attention to the proper task ahead of him, all seem to stem from a basically worldly, humanistic recognition of the inherent value of natural virtue. In contrast, these same virtues seem to be transformed in Gawain so that they are specifically Christian in motivation and finally spiritual in their object. Thus several times the poet notes that Gawain is not pursuing virtue for its own sake: "Sir Gawain rides on God's behalf, not for game or pleasure." But though Gawain's virtue is different in object from Aeneas', it is nonetheless similar in nature. At the outset of his journey, for instance, Gawain reveals his humble submission to the task ahead of him:

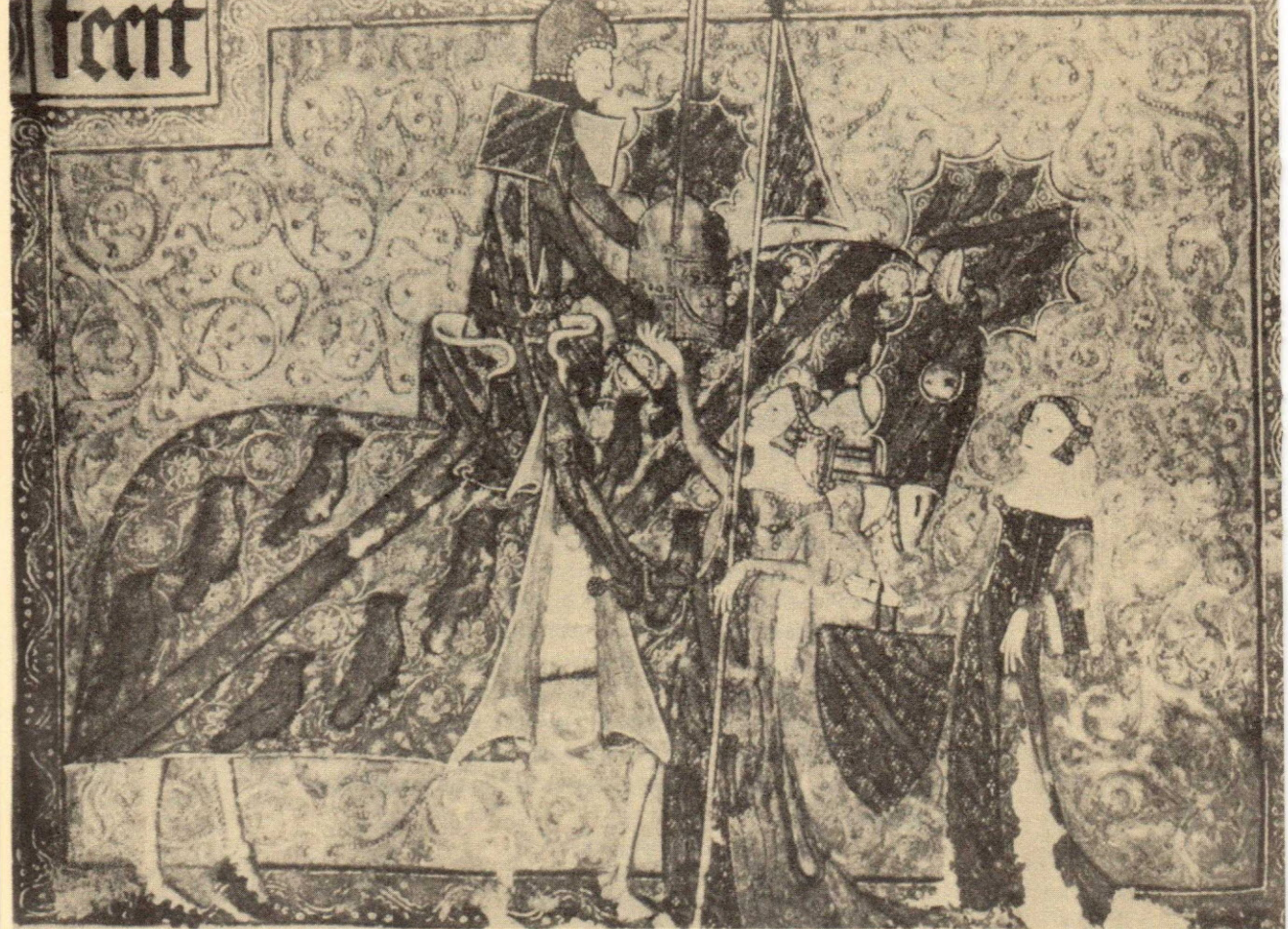
'Why,' he said, 'should I  
Wonder now or fear?  
What may man do but try?'

Similarly, throughout the poem Gawain faithfully performs his religious duties and attributes any good fortune to the generosity of his Saviour and the Saints, the counterparts of Aeneas' household gods. His first action, for instance, when he finds the castle on Christmas is to offer a prayer:

Then meekly he removed his helmet, murmuring full soft  
Thanks to Jesus and Saint Julian, both good and gentle,  
Who lovingly had led him and heard his lamentations.

Finally, Gawain manifests the utmost respect for his kinsman and king, Arthur: "Only do I owe to fame that Arthur is my uncle;/Proudly my body bears your royal blood."





As in the treatment of the hero's virtues, so in the presentation of the ritual arming of the hero the Gawain poet has taken the secular convention or tradition and accommodated it to his Christian context. The ritual arming of the hero is, of course, as old as epic poetry itself and the Gawain poet uses the convention on two separate occasions, both times to re-enforce the stature of the hero and to suggest the enormity of the task before him. This ritual is the conventional symbol of the dedication of the hero to the task of saving his people and goes beyond its literal meaning to an allegorical significance of armor, associated with the Pauline adjuration to the Christian to put on the armor of God.

But perhaps the most striking parallel between the presentation of Gawain as a hero and the presentation of the older epic hero is the device of the shield. The shield which Aeneas carries is especially made for him by Hephaestus and has engraved on it the story of the Roman nation which he is to found; but the engravings do not merely relate a story: they provide the image of a culture, a way of life characterized by certain shared values embodied in communal ceremonies and customs. The symbolism on Gawain's shield is, of course, much more abstract, but it is also finally emblematic not only of Gawain's ideals and virtues, but also of the ideals and virtues of the Arthurian court, for it is the court which has designed the shield and presented it to Gawain. Though Christian worship and customs are consistently presented as playing an important role in the daily lives



of the court, the lengthy explication of Gawain's shield is the most overt treatment of the totally Christian orientation of the kingdom. For the pentagon is, as explained by the poet, the symbol of Christian perfection, and as the standard which Gawain, the representative of the court carries, must be associated not only with him but with the community which he serves.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is, then, composed within the framework of traditional heroic poetry. It is concerned with the ideals of a community as they are embodied in a way of life and specifically as they are embodied in a representative hero who stakes his life on their validity, just as the community stakes its life on their validity. But Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a romance and not an epic and consequently its hero is concerned, finally, not with political action, the establishment of a social order, but rather with moral action, the measurement of the quality of the order. As Alan Markman points out, "It is the function of the romance hero...to demonstrate human capabilities for good or bad action." The romance, then, insofar as it is a Christian poem, is concerned with the quality of heroic action and not merely with its cohesive effect.

The popularity of the romances and their gradual spread away from the aristocracy to the burgeoning middle classes brought about a radical change in their character. The hero became more sensationalistic, less important for the quality of his character than for the exotic and exciting nature of his actions. The death of the romance was hastened by the birth of the book, which caused the

hero, with his marvellous adventures, to become a mere soap-opera figure in a round of interminable and incredible exploits. The romance hero was democratized and exploited as a part of late-medieval escape literature. Though he was very

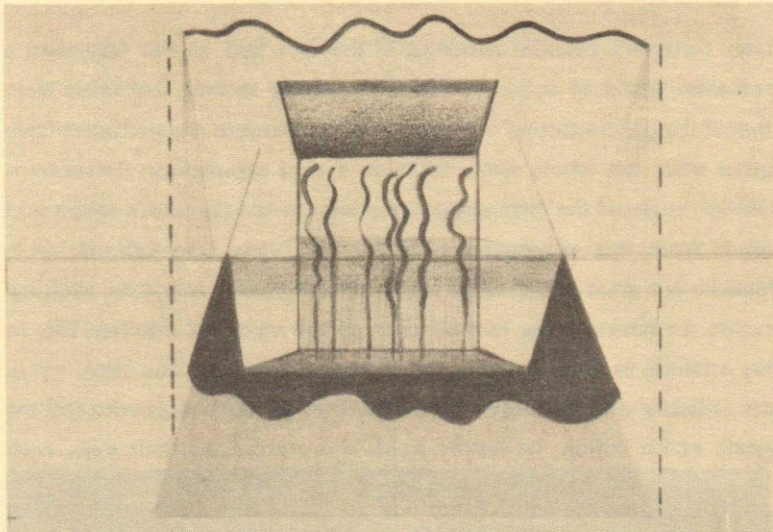
nearly defunct by the time of Cervantes, it is no exaggeration to say that the corrupt and unrecognizable descendants of the Chansons de Geste and of the Arthurian legends were done in, once and for all, by a book,  
THE HISTORY OF  
DON QUIXOTE  
DE LA MANCHA.

#### QUIXOTE: BOOKS AND THE MAN

The problem which Cervantes proposes in Don Quixote is not the "madness" of his protagonist, nor is it the fact that he is alienated from the society in which he acts. Don Quixote is noble in his choice to be a knight, even though his knightly actions have sad repercussions. His personal vision is not stunted in madness; if anything, he is too farsighted. He has given himself to an Heroic World and a very definite structure of value. However, he archly refuses to be taken aback by the fact that heroism does not fit the world he is living in. His society is materialistic, having broken its continuity with the past and the beliefs of its heritage. Don Quixote sets out to re-establish an orderly world according to the code of the chivalric romances and attempts to become a medieval epic hero in a time which no longer desires the services of his knighthood. The order of his imaginative world opposes the disorder of the physical world, and at this moment the break between myth and reality first becomes apparent.

Don Quixote, then, is heroic in his vision of the "right society." Through the use of his imagination, he attempts to re-establish an order which he sees is gone, to bring order back into a seemingly disordered world. His goal is in the tradition of the epic hero, who always struggles for the good of his community. The people of 15th century Spain, having lost the grandeur and unity of past ages, must suffer reformation. The knight, the displaced visionary, spares no violence in acting out his knowledge of what ought to be.

But Don Quixote's vision itself is flawed: his ultimate failure is rooted in his incomplete education. He has not learned about heroism through the full scope which the epic gives; he has learned from romance literature, from books. In the essentially primitive society from which the epic poem usually emerges, the epic vision is part of a communal expression, and exists in a long, unbroken oral tradition. To his people

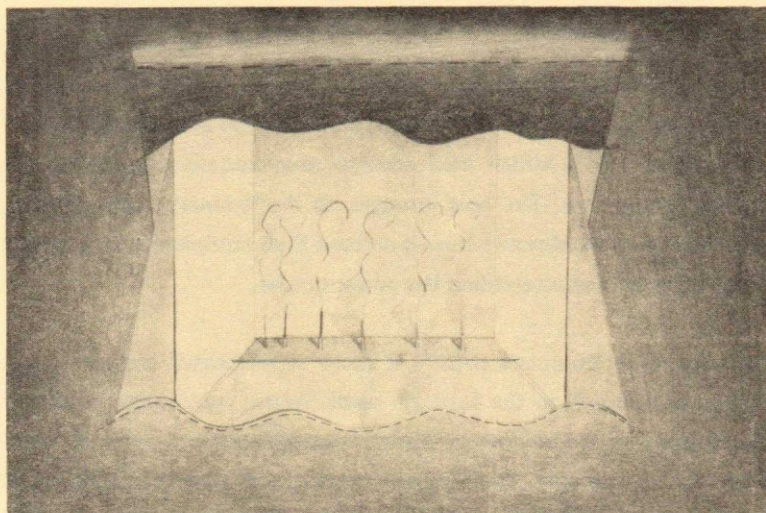


the epic hero and his deeds are "real"—that is, they are accepted by them as an essential part of their history. Thus the epic vision of a past glory, of an age in which men acted as they should act, informs the present generations. The epic struggle, as the listeners understood it, concerned their whole existence—it defined their community by exalting the past which had established the present order.

However, Don Quixote's society is more sophisticated than this one; instead of listening to the bard, he reads. And in gaining the models of life in this way, he inherits for himself an heroic schema quite different from that of the epic. The romance literature of Don Quixote's age is concerned with the individual, who seeks adventure for its own sake, divorced from historical and communal contexts. The true epic finds its natural habitat in recital; it is a shared experience. The romance, on the other hand, exists in the printed book, and thus the transfer of knowledge which should be public becomes the private and isolated enterprise of reading.

the library rather than from the wisdom of the folk, what he intends as an epic action assumes the form of random adventure found in the romances. In absolute terms the romance is a degenerate form of the epic; consequently Quixote's attempt to restore an epic ideal in his world results only in his imposing a debased version of it on an unwilling community. In the realm of his ideal, the goal for which Don Quixote strives is genuinely epic, but because he insists in carrying it out as an isolated individual, because he decides to reconstruct a world based on his private vision of the past, his community regards him as a madman.

Don Quixote's peculiar handicap is the fact that he has fashioned a romantic world of action which is dislocated in time and space from that of the people around him. Since Quixote lives in a world apart from other men, the whole work takes on a vital complexity; Cervantes is careful to reveal the different perspectives toward Quixote's action that result from this estrangement. In his own view Don Quixote de la Mancha is a great figure; all of his actions are to him romantic, exciting, exotic. In having given himself over to the vision of a valiant life, he has attained in some measure the self-possession of a true hero. Yet in the radically different view of his countrymen, the people who feel the result of his action, he hardly holds this stature. In their eyes, each



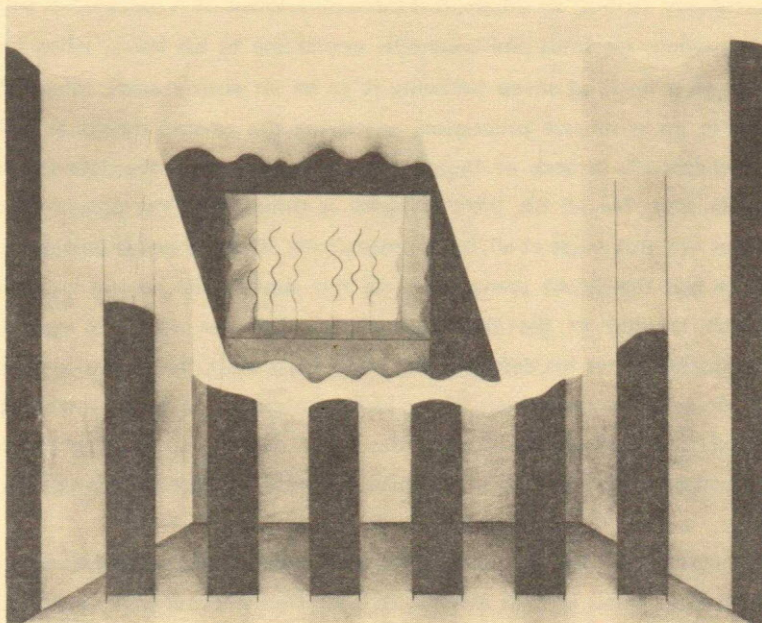
chivalric deed which Don Quixote attempts, each principle or custom which he seeks to carry into practice, appears in a strange and distorted light. To Quixote, his is an epic goal, to which only a man of extraordinary virtue can be equal. Yet at the same time the people around him know that his goal is an absurdity, the scheme of an eccentric. Neither of these attitudes is entirely amiss: Quixote does know what he is—a man of some courage; however, he refuses to see the terrible banality of the real world. The people, on the other hand, can

recognize a dangerous visionary when they see one; but they have no vision of themselves at all.

This radical difference in viewpoint exists throughout the History of Don Quixote de la Mancha: the object of Don Quixote's quest is extremely serious; to others, it is ridiculous. When he is defeated at any time—when he finds the windmills unyielding to his lance, when he charges a flock of sheep believing it to be an enemy army, when he breaks up a funeral procession, scattering the cowled monks as evil “enchanters”—in each of these instances Quixote feels the defeat in a tragic way, for all his life's integrity is threatened. Yet actually his losses are not tragic at all, but melodramatic. These physical defeats are on a less significant plane; they do not contain the mental anguish which is vital to the tragic experience. Quixote does not accept responsibility for his defeat as the tragic hero must, but rather blames his downfall on enchanters whom he has imagined. He does not cut the grand figure which he intends; the other characters, refusing to be bothered by the intensity of his quest, are merely amused at his defeats.

The members of the community have normative attitudes, and they put them into action in their attempt to bring Don Quixote back to sanity. Yet Don Quixote simply cannot conceive of coming back into the normal world. Despite all the devices of the townspeople to reconstitute him as Alonso Quixano, he remains locked in the world of romance as Don Quixote de la Mancha? even when he is carried back to town in a cage through the trickery of the priest and the barber, he again claims that he is at the mercy of the magical enchanters who work to thwart him at every turn. Each of Quixote's returns is only a pseudo-comic movement. For he re-enters the society to which he truly belongs only physically; in imagination he is still set apart from the community. It is only when he is defeated by the Knight of the White Moon that a true comic return is begun, that is, one which will restore the norms which Quixote has violated in his “madness.” Yet in this final defeat he does not have the comic stature which the community sees, but for the first time he begins to assume a genuinely tragic role. Unlike his other defeats, Don Quixote cannot attribute this one to enchanters; he has been beaten in an honorable encounter and has lost at the hand of another knight. His failure is not only physical, but imaginative as well, for through his downfall he is touched at a profound level. His stature as a knight has been destroyed, and the code which he has envisioned and by which he has lived has lost its focus in his shame. Yet despite the

depth of vision which Don Quixote is forced to meet, still the other characters see his return from ultimate defeat in a burlesque way. They see only that the madman Alonso Quixano is finally coming to his senses, and they are relieved to know that he will not continue to bother them with his antics. Ignorant of the worth of the chivalric code which



he has upheld, they see only that the disorder in the community has been rectified. Don Quixote's final defeat has been brought about in his imaginary world of chivalry, not by an outside force. In order to bring Quixote back to the society he has left, the Knight of the White Moon has had to partake of that imaginary world, enter it through disguise, and defeat him on his own terms. The action of the Knight of the White Moon is the cleverest device the community can use to restore the madman to sanity. Yet even after he is conquered, Quixote does not revert to his old life. He recognizes failure in its final form, and knows that his world of knight-errantry can no longer stand. He has not yet learned to distinguish imaginative conventions from "real" social behavior, and he substitutes one book-world for another. He decides that he will join the builders of the New Arcadia. Failing once again to learn the lesson about books that everyone has been trying to teach him, Quixote eludes the society which would save him and slips into yet another enchanted realm designed to bring back the Golden Age. Only death—the most complete removal from society—is powerful enough to remove Quixote from his illusions, to prevent him from slipping through one set of imaginative conventions after another.

The death of Don Quixote is central to a complete vision of the work. It is there that he becomes a critic of integrity (if also of near-fanaticism—he reacts much more violently to the books of chivalry than the fair-minded curate ever did) and a new kind of hero. Not only does Quixote's death bring about a complete reversal of his attitude, it very nearly reverses his society as well. The ironic aspect of Quixote's death is that he has finally convinced his society that he is what he claimed to be—a true knight. When Don Quixote is dying, he renounces the books of chivalry, but the people will not release him from his image of knight-errant. Because the society has had to enter, in a token fashion, into his imaginary world in order to bring the madman to his senses, they have had to accept the world in which Don Quixote was living as a viable possibility. He fails colossally; yet it is the image of a great man that remains in our minds, not the petty nobleman living on a run-down farm. The image of the Knight of the White Moon as he defeats the noble knight Don Quixote is more prominent than the image of the bachelor Sanson Carrasco as he outwits the madman Alonso Quixano. Because no one, finally, will accept the fact that the real man is Alonso Quixano, all the characters have at last entered into an imaginary world. Quixote has triumphed; personally his life was a failure of judgment, a mistaken understanding of life and of literature, but symbolically he has conquered, and in an heroic fashion. The only reality in the book, finally, is the reality expressed by Alonso Quixano's confession. It is Don Quixote who is dying, not Alonso Quixano; the curate, Sancho, and the others carry on the illusion that Don Quixote began. Only Alonso Quixano himself can see the dual reality of his death. Only he knows how to face his end. It is in this final moment of individualism—in his death—that Quixote-Quixano turns the private romance-quest into a great universal struggle. Quixote has indeed become a hero. In a world which was his and which is still ours where traditional heroism seems hardly acceptable, he defines the basic element of heroism. The bookish knight has died so that the real man can face the ultimate and most heroic event of all: the acceptance of his mortal condition.

LIKE DON QUIXOTE, HIS NEAR CONTEMPORARY, HAMLET ALSO SUFFERS FROM THE FINAL SPLIT BETWEEN A HERO AND HIS SOCIETY. HE SEEKS ORDER IN HIS WORLD WITH AS MUCH VEHEMENCE AS QUIXOTE, BUT THE RESULT IS TRAGIC RATHER THAN COMIC: HAMLET GIVES HIS LIFE FOR THE HOPELESSLY FRAGMENTED REALM OF HIS DEAD FATHER, WHERE NOT MERELY TRADITION, BUT THE FAMILY ITSELF HAS BEEN DESTROYED. THE HISTORY OF THE MODERN WORLD SINCE THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY HAS BEEN THE WORKING OUT OF THE IMPLICATIONS IN QUIXOTE AND HAMLET.

The book	which	introduced	a new	perspective
in	the West	had	to be	totally
assimilated	before	men	could	see
the	ravages	which	had	been
wrought	in	European	culture	The
prophets	of	order	did	not
truly	arise	until	the	nineteenth
century	and	then	they	were
such	men	as	Thomas	Carlyle
who	wrote	of	the	French
Revolution	and	gave	a	series
of	lectures	on	the	hero
in	modern	(middle-	class)	society
and	his	nature	in	former
times	European	culture	then	had
come	full	circle	from	the
time	of	Dante	when	the
medieval	world	had	achieved	its
fullest	intellectual	and	spiritual	unity.
Dante	and	his	vision	of
the	mystic	rose	had	given
way	to	a	new	vision
of	the	whole	one	which
included	the	catastrophic	violence	of
recent	revolt	and	war	as
well	as			
ideas	which			
were	altering			
the	world.			

Carlyle prefaced his lectures on heroism with the statement that, as Parmenides believed, the world of things is but a sham, and the ordinary man lives in a world of surfaces, unable even to brush against reality. He then defines the hero as one who has been given Insight, the power to see beyond the physical world into the transcendent oneness of Being. Those who have this power, he contended, are a breed apart from the rest of humanity.

Each lecture of Carlyle's explored the typical hero during some point in history. The first hero Carlyle delineates is the god, corresponding to the primitive ages of man. His example is Odin, the All-Father in Norse mythology, who finds himself in a still-unformed world and carves a supreme kingdom out of hostile elements.

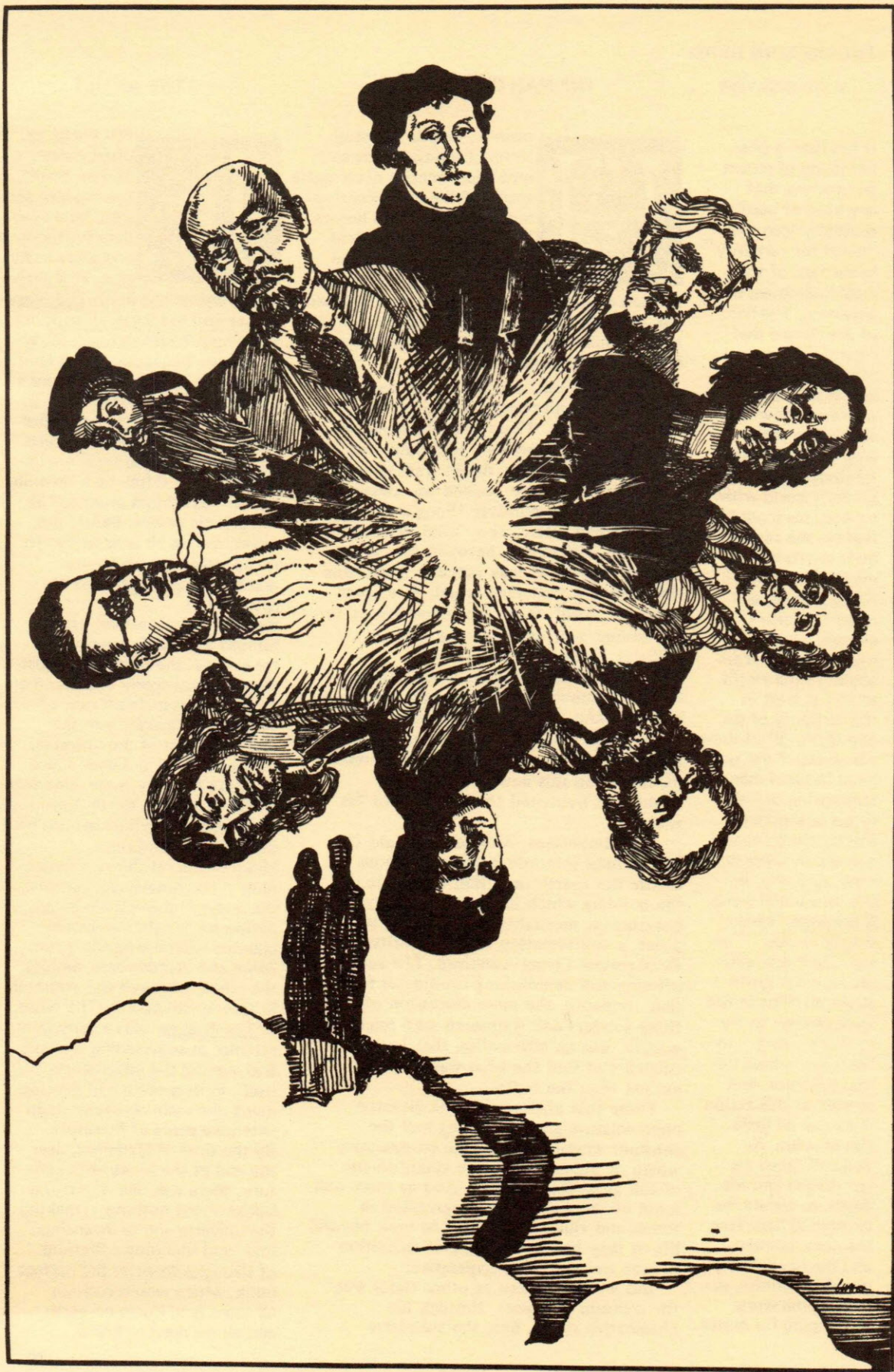


He then turns to the hero as **prophet**, who provides the link between divine and human, carrying the divine word to groping mankind. His examples are the great instillers of religion, Moses, Mohammed and Buddha.

He then divides the hero into:

- poet**—who, through his superior intellect and sensitivity, is able to express the vision of an entire world. Once civilization is established, the hero need no longer transfer the Word directly to the people; he can become an example to society.
- priest**— Unlike the prophet, he is the man of principles who, because of his conscience and the pure life he leads, is forced to rebel against the institutions of the past and establish a new order directed by his own righteousness. A bearer of his own light, he now can openly controvert the wisdom of the world.
- king**—The rebel hero now gains courage, takes up arms and leads the people where they would not go of themselves—to a state he deems better for them. At this stage the hero is finally demythologized, existing now in the immediate world of social action.
- man of letters**—This man of the future, as Carlyle projected, is the hero of the world of ideas. He is able to direct the progress of a whole culture merely by dictating his ideas. This is rather terrifying concept had already been exemplified in Carlyle's time by such French writers as Descartes and Rousseau, who were able to shape the whole world of the Enlightenment, because their culture had shriveled up to such a degree that it could be blown about by the great winds of the mind.

Borne aloft by a cloud of  
contemplation,  
the poets I and Thou observe the  
Mystic Rose of latter-day  
intellectuals.  
Counterclockwise from top:  
Luther, Lenin, Knox,  
Joyce, Descartes, Rousseau,  
Marx, Goethe,  
Cromwell, Carlyle.



## THE MODERN HERO

a synoptic view

It has been a phenomenon of recent generations that any kind of heroism is usually seen as a "quest for certainty" in the face of the meaninglessness of existence. The hero of the absurd that Sartre, Camus, and others describe; the heroes of Hemingway's novels who attempt in some way to answer the facelessness of the modern world with a severe personal integrity; the aesthetic hero so preoccupying Proust, Mann, Kafka, Joyce, and other European writers, who removes himself from action in the world to rest at least in the certainty of poetic truth—all of these are girues of the isolated modern man attempting to justify his unsupported and burdensome uniqueness in space and time. Actually, in this existential sense it becomes "heroic" simply to "be." "Being" itself is a realization never quite attained. Thus in the modern view to try to attain being, —to "become"—is an heroic endeavor, and outside of this action there can be little else of value. As Beowulf faced his last dragon and his death, so we see the existential hero face the next moment and the next with a dreadful surmise, expecting the worst but hoping for better.

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However, despite the intellectual leanings of the early republic, America never quite accepted the intellectual as representative of its heroes. The man of transcendent insight, bogus or genuine, could no longer survive in a nineteenth-century land full of frontiersmen and farmers. The Edgar Allen Poes were anomalies, unrepresentative and unheralded, and had no place in folklore or myth.

The American nation, in the early years of the nineteenth century, required heroes. There was, in some dim corner of the American consciousness, a place inhabited by doubt and unease, a place where there resided an awareness of distances, in political thought as well as geography. Here, too, lived reflections upon the differences between the plain style of life as it was actually lived, and that elevated existence which it seemed ought to result from the embodiment in the young new state of the best in political philosophy.

The Americans named their children after Columbus and Washington, Jefferson and Franklin. By merely belonging to a name made noble by an earlier bearer, a son would surely find a more certain footing upon this newer earth. He might well transcend the mean lot of his ancestors.

More important, Americans sought the hero. Those interminable conversations before the hearth or within the shade of the building which housed the county government inevitably turned to, at some point, a consideration of the identity of the Greatest Living American. The act of offering and demolishing candidates for that eminence, the mere discussion of those soliders and statesmen who might qualify, was an affirmation that heroism existed and that the hero was no more extinct than the buffalo.

These two phenomena, the elevated nomenclature given offspring and the constant examination of the comparative worth of public men, were symptomatic of the quest for the hero. And as more and more of the Americans congregated in towns and villages, the need to look beyond life as they knew it to a purer definition of man became more imperative.

But while the hero in other times was the creation of a poet, through his imaginative vision, here the collective

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Even the artist, the usual creator of heroes, could, in the modern situation, be a candidate for heroism, and early in fiction, as Maurice

Beebe points out in his *The Ivory Tower and the Sacred Fount*, an artist-hero began to make his appearance. Beginning in the later eighteenth century we glimpse a new kind of figure, sensitive, introverted and self-centered, passive and absent-minded or even strangely possessed by some demonic drive. Often he is an exile, and he has seldom attained his full artistic powers before the novel reaches its conclusion. In many instances, his future greatness is only a matter for speculation.

Because he has not yet proved himself as a viable member of his society, the artist-hero must spurn the company of other men to pursue his difficult task of attaining an insight into the hidden secrets of the universe. In the writings of James Joyce or, more recently, such American novelists as John Barth, this kind of artist-hero perhaps attains his definitive presentation.

Much earlier, at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, the quest of the artistic imagination for insight was being equated with the heroic quest. Blake and Wordsworth, among the poets, explored this equation in epic-length poems. The latter, in *The Prelude*, was a conscious attempt at superseding the epic and making the imagination itself, in its growth and development, the main character in an extensive piece of literature. By the time of Mallarme, near the end of the nineteenth century, there was talk of writing books about nothing, remaking the universe and re-inventing love, and spending a lifetime of struggles to write the perfect book, which would contain all there is to know on earth and all we need to know.

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relating the deepest religious ideals to this sense of dread, Paul Tillich has defined the essential virtue of Christian existence as "the courage to be." The Christian existentialists of the modern age propose for their "Christian hero" an image parallel to that of the isolated man. Kierkegaard defines the Christian hero at length and constantly returns to this heroism as a central premise of his work. In *Fear and Trembling* he proposes that a man enters the truly heroic realm only through faith. Through a severe and mysterious act of "infinite resignation" the "knight," the seeker of truth, reconciles himself to absurdity and transcends it in the higher act of faith. Few people in this regard are knights of faith; for to be so they must meet absurdity as the antithesis to being—and most men in the face of it are "faint-hearted" and lack the "courage to be."

Perhaps, after all, men are justified in their weakness before the existential heroic action. This vision of Christian heroism proposes strength of will as an answer to doubt, courage as a counter to unbelief. And thus the Anglo-Saxon virtues reappear in a strange form: without the monster to kill or the hoard to win, this heavy-headed hero looks pale and intellectual. This is the image of the Christian hero which the "modern" age has rendered out of its nature: is it quite full enough to express the implications of Christian responsibility?

Rather than viewing man in this way as an isolated being trying to handle mysterious realities by himself, traditional Christianity envisions man as a communal creature who learns and serves the ways of mystery in his relations with his fellow creatures. Every true Christian is a "Christian Hero," primarily by virtue of his election. And, given his election, he is heroic also in his personal action, which is accomplished by means of grace. The "heroism" of the Christian, traditionally, is highly qualified, since it exists only with the recognition that human action is at all points contingent upon Divine Will.

The traditional view of the Christian hero places more emphasis on the imagination than upon courage. The action of the Christian must flow from an openness to visionary and mysterious truth, from the realm of the imagination. It is this reality of Christian existence that Jeremiah and other prophets of the Old Testament describe when they tell Israel that her sin is "the imagination of her evil heart" which will bring down the

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one of the most puzzling aspects of this modern concept of heroism is, interestingly enough, to be found in the materialist eschatology of Marxist-Leninism, a systematic theory of the modern hero.

The fulfillment of the secular-humanist dream of the hero is possible within the scheme of Communism. For the Communist hero is necessarily secular and purely ideological; and thus he is heir in some way to the Carlylean visionary hero. Yet the super-hero as Carlyle has described him could have no real part in a Communist world—one in which individual expression is at all times subordinate to mandates for the "common good." In this system, a man cannot be a hero in any sense: for the man who elevates himself above other men is defying the dogma of the state. Even the leaders of the party are officially only guardians of the people, in service to history.

The Marxist-Leninist hero does not come out of the present order at all; rather, he is an image posited for the future. Marxism shows us "man" as a social entity, in the process of "becoming." He becomes what he is truly only when history is completed, at which time each man will be everything that he ought to be—the ideal man now materialized. In the existing order, however, man is "man" only in potency; his humanity is not fully realized. Thus, though no man can ever really be a hero, the people are given a party image to emulate: the Marxist-Leninist hero, an ideological invention—the man who will emerge at the end of the social dialectic.

The Communist party uses every means at its disposal to foster belief in the advent of this hero and to create him, including the control of literary production. In the Pasternak case and a recent writers' trial in the Soviet Union, the socialist image of the hero came into question. Commenting

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longing of the people called him forth. The first colonial settlers were separated by the sea from ancient ties and traditions, and they had to face life in circumstances that European man had never known. So, too, did the hero they created. He was of the new world and of the new time. He was not of the past but of the present, and since Americans were primarily concerned with activities which minimized literary craft, the hero would be a living man, still making his legend, rather than a dead one whose story could be reshaped by the bardic imagination.

A stage appropriate to the figure was readily at hand. To the American living along the Atlantic seaboard in those early years, the western portion of the continent was almost as little known as the new world had been to the Admiral of the Ocean Sea. The very word—West—conjured up visions of a land huge and unharnessed, not significantly altered by the hand of man since God made it and set it spinning and went off to tend to the doings of the issue of Eve. It was a country peopled by races unmet and beasts not yet classified. And when Thomas Jefferson asked his secretary, Meriwether Lewis, to venture out far beyond the Appalachians and to report his findings, rumor had it that the mastodon still roamed that land in the shadow of mountains of solid salt.

Thus the hero, the Man of the West, was summoned to life. He was Daniel Boone and Nolichucky Jack Sevier, who mastered the wilderness and made places for their people. Later, he was Andrew Jackson, who fought Indians and the British, and Sam Houston, who did all that and took on Santa Anna's Mexicans too. He was David Crockett, Jim Bowie, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, and John Fremont. He was Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and, after a time, Abraham Lincoln.

All of these men had certain qualities in common: strength, courage, the ability to see what must be done, and the ability to act. But none of them perhaps represents the hero in the totality of his powers and the entire range of his appeal. The Man of the West found his definitive embodiment in the popular figure of the cowboy.

He is not, however, merely a cowboy in the ordinary sense. We have mythified him far beyond his basic identity, the ranch hand and puncher of cattle. He is a man of more diversified skills, and his talents and capacities obviously fit him for a much larger role in life than the range could ever absorb. His is a past that has always been spent in the open spaces. He may, as a matter of fact, have been a drover in the years before we met

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Only the artist, in the modern era, has tried seriously to claim the status of hero among the mock-heroes and anti-heroes who circulate through so much of nineteenth-century thought, and in some ways we may concur with the artists themselves in recognizing the creative act as a valid heroic gesture. In an age when leveling and democratic ideals made it difficult for any man to seem outstanding, the artist was able to claim a special place in society, available only to a chosen few, and, if his work went unnoticed, undertaken against the greatest of all enemies, ignorance and neglect. With the loss of a sense of the sacred in religion, the artist had to turn to his own mysterious creative processes for deliverance from a humdrum world that threatened all identity. He made his art more and more obscure, more and more hieratic, until it became like a religion, accessible only to an aristocracy of initiates. He would play court to his equals but not to the rabblement. He would fly by the nets of society to escape mediocrity and undergo, for his art's sake, difficulties of exceptional intensity. In a fashion which is directly parodic of the central Christian ritual, the Mass, he became both the priest and the victim of a heroic and transcendent human sacrifice. By seeking out a world which has a hierarchy of persons and values, the universe of art and imagination, he spurned a world which no longer had a place for heroism and doggedly built a new civilization. Like *Pisthetairios*, in Aristophanes' utopian comedy *The Birds*, he became the hero of a society which was his own invention, but he addressed himself only to an elite. A kind of Renaissance courtier, he played his heroism only before the aristocrats of the mind.

The inheritors of the symbolist traditions in poetry, Paul Valéry and Rainer Maria Rilke, W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, all saw their tasks as Herculean. They struggled relentlessly against the void: the indifference of society to their visions, the loss of communication among men, and the bad taste and lack of judgment of their contemporaries. As men of letters their goals were directed towards the moral and spiritual reawakening of society, but they, in their artistic hauteur, refused to commit the didactic heresy of bringing art down to the flaccid intelligences of the common or middle-class populaces. They taught only by example and through their exemplary lives as devoted artists rather than through their creations. The heroic goals of the modern artist were to explore all the paths of experience, to effect an aesthetic transformation of the earth, to reassert order, mystery, and visionary knowledge by their ceaseless attempts to exhaust the knowable

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"Wrath of God." Jeremiah is here saying that the people has lost its capacity for memory and for communal religious myth and thus can no longer know the reality of a life in Yahweh which should be theirs. The wrath that will come is in some sense the self-violence of the people's willfull ignorance of religious and imaginative truth.

The Christian, then, has two dimensions to his heroism. He is on the one hand a visionary who perceives and contemplates the plan of God and his relation to Divine Will; he is on the other hand a witness to other men and is responsible for communication of the truth he has seen, for service to the community of men through his witness.

There are, of course, many figures of this Christian hero in literature, the earliest of which is Dante, the Christian par excellence. Dante represents the Christian hero as the poet, who accomplishes the communication of his vision in an act of creativity. Dante is for the Middle Ages a truly epic figure at the same time that he possesses a Christian anonymity. There can be no equivalent to Dante in modern literature; his communication of religious truth through poetry presupposes a religious myth which is shared by his audience, a myth in which the modern poet cannot participate. Dante is heroic in his role of visionary, for he achieves through his visionary journey of faith the desired end of man; he understands through his vision the possibility of the Beatific Vision. In order to present this archetypal Christian vision to other men he must, in fact, recollect it in a poem. In this way the truth he has seen as a poet-pilgrim, although never made wholly comprehensible, is at least made intelligible in some degree through the human imagination.

In the tradition of Jeremiah and John the Baptist, the Christian hero can reconcile the double nature of his responsibility by becoming a "prophet" of the truth. In this role the hero exists apart from the world of men and appears only when he must warn them of the "terrible speed of Justice" which the Lord administers. The prophet speaks specifically to secular man, to the secular city; he testifies that the city of man is meaningless when it has become autonomous, when it has lost its religious memory. It is this kind of figure that we see in Flannery O'Connor's novel *The Violent Bear It Away*. Young Tarwater is given a thorough vocational training in prophecy by his uncle. He is taught first the schema of human history: "His uncle taught him...history beginning with Adam expelled from the Garden and going on down through the presidents to Herbert Hoover and on in speculation toward the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment."

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on *Dr. Zhivago* at the All-Moscow Meeting of radically untraditional stand which the novel takes:

The book's philosophy . . . bears no relation to our Soviet way of thinking. . . . the whole array of characters is purposely chosen to show that everything even remotely fine . . . perishes and is crushed and trampled by the forces of revolution, leaving behind only stupid, . . . brutal people.

Contrary to Pasternak's individualist view of the people, the officially sanctioned literature portrays Soviet man as "liberated," fitting comfortably into the historical, material, and social schema of the Party. Indeed, in delineating the virtues of the people's hero, the Party is aided by Russian history. For centuries, a strong cultural and religious belief that the Russian people would be the salvation of the world has governed the psychic life of Russia. This conviction of ethnic strength—present to some extent in all great peoples—began to be intellectualized after the importation of Western ideas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The national teleology became secular: a deeply religious people no longer worked toward the New Jerusalem but toward the material city of Communism.

Nineteenth-century Russian socialists considered the Russian peasant to be both suffering and messianic; to them, the social experience of the peasant became an exemplar for future change. They felt that this new man which the peasant would become would be a product of the material forces of nature—he would be man made distinct from the rest of nature and glorified through the labor process. His social task could be entered into creatively with other men because in a Communist society men would be no longer dominated by class structure. In promoting the image of the Communist hero, it was Stalin who recognized that political symbols, necessary for maintaining the inspirational unity of the community, must be recruited by the Party from the ranks of the Russian national historical experience. He saw to some extent that any ideals which the Party proposed had to be grounded in the concrete to be effective.

## THE MAN OF THE WEST

him, but we would doubtless be disappointed in a Lone Ranger who was only a herder and tender of cattle.

Yet the cowboy hero was not, initially at least, the product of a sophisticated and highly literate culture. When he came into being he was a contemporary of the same people who were shaping his myth through stories and legends; he existed outside of hard covers, beyond the page, among the heroes of oral tradition. There were, of course, exceptions such as Wister, but the cowboy was and, in many ways, continues to be celebrated by oral and mass media: by song and tale, film, radio, and television, pulp magazines and comic strips.

The great interest of the American public in the cowboy can only be explained by reference to the frontiersmen whose heroic achievements placed his attributes in a new and attractive light. One of his most striking qualities, for instance, was his isolation from society. He was wise in the ways of men and yet not a part of their company. Since those who called him into being were wedded to a pedestrian existence, with an occupation and a location that were more or less permanent, they looked with envy on the glamor of the unconfined life that a cowboy led and made him a mobile hero. He was also of the outdoors, since the man who was closest to the soil was also the most virtuous of God's creatures (why else does any aspirant to political office, who is able to make that claim, emphasize his farm boy origins?). Indeed, he only left the soil and came into the company of men to set things to rights. After he performed his function, he retired, seeking obscurity, to return if he was needed.

function, he retired. Only if justice had to be done again would he consider returning. Whenever he was shown in the company of another, the companion served only to emphasize the virtues of the hero or provide a less somber touch. Because the hero was also possessed of a complete knowledge of nature and was competent to meet any hazard, he was entirely self-sufficient.

We never see the cowboy hero as a boy, nor do we know him in old age. He is eternally thirty-five years old, tall, so that we must look up to him, and spare and unmarried—uncorrupted by food or women. And should he imbibe to excess, he does so only to demonstrate that his extraordinary control cannot be affected by spirits in quantity sufficient to impair the functioning of an ordinary human.

He is of few words; action is the most effective mode of communication. The only hint we have of a past for him, other than the years it must have taken to acquire his

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world, and, finally, to elevate man out of the materialistic doldrums into which he had fallen during the nineteenth century.

The best-known version of the artist-hero in English is, of course, Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Like his intellectual ancestors, Stephen is a solitary, misunderstood rebel; he is the moral voice of a nation in which he cannot bear to be a citizen. He must, to carry out his high mission, reject the demands of family, church, and country, and he goes into voluntary exile in order to accomplish his Shelleyan vision of the poet as the moral lawgiver of mankind. But he is the last of his kind. Stephen is everything that the symbolist artist, exiled and tormented by his goals, was supposed to be, but he has not really earned the right to his title of hero. Joyce's first title for the novel, Stephen Hero, was ironic, and Stephen does not discover his mission, as the romantic or symbolist poet was forced to do, through the hardships of a truly demanding art. He merely assumes a stance, aping his elders. As a pompous young man he takes nothing seriously except himself; he is a hero who claims greatness and moral stature before he has earned them.

In Ulysses Joyce takes us a step beyond the "hero" of the Portrait. In that novel, an immature Stephen is contrasted directly with Leopold Bloom, the Ulysses of the title and an all-suffering, wandering, patient man who has faced squarely all the hardships of life that Stephen has tried to fly beyond. Bloom is a paradoxical version of the artist-hero. He is not really an artist, but he has done many of the things that the artist-hero claims as his forte: he has suffered much, endured long, seen many things. He perhaps owes a great deal to Tennyson's "Ulysses," the man who leaves Telemachus to rule an Ithaca that, as a man of experience, he has outgrown. In the Portrait Joyce seems to be suggesting that modern man began with a jejune and immature version of the artist-hero. And indeed, almost any of Joyce's other figures of the artist is more convincing than Stephen—even Father Flynn and Gabriel Conroy in Dubliners seem more solid because they manage to endure their isolation without becoming doctrinaire. Bloom is no the antique that Stephen is: the young man is the peculiarly Mediterranean version of the artist-hero, a version which is alien to the workings of the English (and Irish) mind. The Anglo-Saxon poet of many lands and experiences, like Widsith, is closer to Joyce's true artistic ideal. Bloom is probably the real artist, not Stephen.

As Richard Ellmann, in his biography of Joyce, points out, "Joyce was the first to en-

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Tarwater is thus made to understand the spiritual plan of the fallen world to which he must serve as visionary. His witness to this world is perforce a violent one. Tarwater himself is violent in utterance. He speaks to men who "have eyes but see not and ears that hear not," and he cannot modulate his reactionary tone to their conventional standards. His message is one of condemnation and "wrath" instrumented through the violence of God's Justice and through the self-violence of men. At the end of the novel, Tarwater, "burned clean" by the Lord, goes toward the city, where he communicates the paradox of Christian vision—of Judgment and Mercy—by speaking and acting for truth at every opportunity that presents itself.

The figure of the prophet represents directly a part of the reality of Christ which the Christian seeks to imitate. Christ is the fulfillment of the prophetic tradition of Israel, as he prophesied men's salvation or condemnation under the New Covenant which his death would establish. A third figure of the Christian hero also reveals another dimension of the Christian mission: this imitation of Christ is in the image of the teacher. The followers of Christ were to "teach all nations"; teaching is the responsibility of the true disciple.

The action of the teacher involves the same dimensions as that of the poet and the prophet. St. Thomas states in *De Magistro* that teaching unites the contemplative and the active orders since it is concerned on the one hand with truth, which is within the contemplative order, and at the same time with service to another in the act of revealing truth, by which it is within the active order. Again we recognize the pattern of a "witness," a communication to other men, which follows from a vision of truth.

The teacher is perhaps the fullest image of the Christian hero. He is indeed a hero, but an ambiguous one, for his action, like that of the poet and of the prophet, is oblique. Knowing that the peculiar "heroism" of Christian action would be questioned by his modern audience, Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote an ironic apologia for his "hero" in the preface to *The Brothers Karamazov*:

...although I call Alexey Fyodorovich my hero, I myself know that he is by no means a great man, and hence I foresee such unavoidable questions as these: "What is so remarkable a-

bout your Alexey Fyodorovich, that you have chosen him as your hero? What has he accomplished? What is he known for, and by whom? ...the fact is, if you please, that he is a protagonist, but a protagonist vague and

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Within Marxism the ideological image of the hero has suffered transformation. The natural tendency to concretize the hero has recently manifested itself in the "Revisionist" movement. Many revisionist ideologists have questioned the traditional Marxist stand on determinism, taking a stand against the abstraction of the system. Djilas in *The New Class* and Kolakowski in "History and Responsibility" present critiques of historical materialism which undercut the imaginary hero of the future. Kolakowski asks, "What right does [the Communist] have in the name of speculative dialectics to renounce the best values of human life in the present? . . . to sacrifice truth, self-respect, and eternal human values for the future is to sacrifice the future."

The rejection of the concept of the Party hero is already taking place in Soviet artistic literature. The revisionist writers of Poland, Czechoslovakia and other satellite countries have attacked the "mythological" hero as a vague abstraction which turns man into an object, an impersonal social mechanism directed from above. Abstractions, they write, can be crushed, cut up, filed away, slaughtered or glorified. They remain dumb and unreal.

What has come out of the abstract hero of the Marxist dream, then, is the existential hero, who demands above all else his personal responsibility and individual awareness. His foe is not only the Communist Party, who in the name of abstract humanity takes away his human attributes, but also the coward who will allow himself to be stripped of his humanity. The first impulses toward a more humanistic hero in the existential man have been expanded. Sartre writes in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that Communist materialism is a revolutionary "myth" which once had practical value insofar as it freed the people from religious superstition and gave it the confidence needed to challenge the established order. But its unreality has now become evident, and it can therefore no longer serve as an explanation of the world nor as a source of moral energy. In its place,

## THE MAN OF THE WEST

vast knowledge and judgment, is an unstated sadness which might have come from a self-betrayal. Most important, he is wholly good, although he is not religious. But his concept of right and wrong is strongly developed and does not defer to conflicting institutional forms.

His way is picaresque. As a result, he does not accumulate knowledge from one episode to the next. His past encounters with evil in men have not made him bitter or cynical, nor does he prejudge the wrongdoers with whom he must deal. On the contrary, he is an optimist, for there is an implied statement within his philosophy that if the instant skirmish is won, right and justice will prevail.

Some slight alteration has occurred in the cowboy hero since he ceased being a true contemporary. The television format of a series usually requires that he have some visible source of income: the Mavericks had to be gamblers; the Matt Dillons, marshals. But the other qualities remain. Even though the hero has given up some mobility, his separateness from the rest of the community is still retained: a marshal comes only temporarily to rest.

After the frontier reached the Pacific and the passed-over spaces had been filled in, the West, in popular thought, remained relatively untamed. Wild and West were kindred words, at least until World War II gave Americans the chance to see all of their country. And when the airplane and the highway had dispelled the mysteries of distance and of anonymous terrain, the West came to stand, also, for whatever was unknown and unorganized. It came to represent, in addition to geographical situs, that combination of circumstances that permitted a single man to confront danger and evil directly, to challenge, and, through courage and wisdom and dexterity, to prevail against it.

The closing of the frontier did not extinguish the cowboy hero; he would continue to exist in fiction and legend. The contemporary Man of the West would take other forms. He would be Henry Stanley, off to search a strange land for Dr. David Livingston. That hero who would have been a Wyatt Earp or Bill Cody or William Hickok in years past became Alvin York, a solitary Tennessean with a rifle, transplanted to an alien world of trenches and barbed wire. And about the same time, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, who had first demonstrated his prowess behind the wheel of a racing car, was mastering a new technological device and was becoming America's most celebrated air ace.

In the new figures the necessity that the Man of the West right wrongs was not

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dow an urban man of no importance with heroic consequences." It is no longer prowess of body, physical strength or brute force, but qualities of mind and heart which distinguish Leopold Bloom from other men. Bloom's past, present, and future world is the one in which he is involved now; his heroism consists precisely in his acceptance of the here and now which he cannot change or affect. He has his plans for a rule of peace and courtesy on earth—his "new Bloomusalem,"—but it is merely a genial figment of his embarrassed imagination. While not precisely an anti-hero, Bloom is a living commentary on the plausibility of the artist as hero.

In making Bloom his hero, Joyce comes close to a totally destructive irony. The pretensions of Stephen to an aristocratic power, beyond the ken of ordinary men, are deflated by Bloom's bourgeois ability to get along without it. Stephen's own poetry is a disappointment; Bloom's creations, because we do not expect miracles from him, are more viable achievements, even if they are only short-lived pieces of advertising copy.

If in real life we may say that Joyce was both a Stephen Dedalus and a Leopold Bloom, we must admit that the artist who can see the comic possibilities in his own hierophantic heritage is a step beyond the old-fashioned notion of the artist-hero. In fact Joyce's works constitute a kind of commentary on the significance of the artist in the modern world, from the mystical priesthood of art towards the common man's celebration of and participation in the values which the artist-hero claimed so loudly to represent. In *Finnegans Wake* Everyman is the artist, and every man is a hero in his own epic. Stephen and Bloom are one; the artist and his creation are the same—all part of the never-ending flow of life itself. But Joyce fails, in his last book, by saying too much. If all men are artists, then there is little or no place for a book like *Finnegans Wake* or an artist like James Joyce. We can all dream our own multilevel languages and become our own heroes. From the delicate balance of *Ulysses*, which both asserted the heroic values in the artistic vision and limited them, Joyce moves to a dangerously solipsistic kind of art, in which, like Emerson's Brahma, all things are their opposites. While it is unfair to *Finnegans Wake* to imply that the book only has meaning for its author, Joyce's solution to the problem of making art relevant to society and retaining its function of providing deep insight at the same time is a dead end.

As Ortega y Gasset points out in his long essay on the dehumanization of art, neither art nor the artist is likely to be taken quite as seriously in the future as they have in the re-

## THE CHRISTIAN

undefined...it happens that such a person, I dare say, carries within himself the very heart of the universal, and the rest of the men of his epoch have for some reason been temporarily torn from it, as if by a gust of wind.

The young man Alyosha (Alexey) has been educated by the holy monk Zossima and given a clear, if somewhat too abstract and spiritual, vision of the kingdom. It is only after a severe trial, brought on by Father Zossima's death and Alyosha's consequent test of faith, that he experiences the depth of his consecration to Christ. He leaves the monastery to serve within the secular world, as his beloved Elder had predicted. It is in his encounter with the sinful and the suffering in the world that his strength is made complete. We see him, finally, at the end of the novel teaching the young and witnessing to them of a faith of heroic dimension.

Though he is by nature a meek one, an "angel," as his wicked old father calls him, Alyosha, in putting on the armor of the Lord, becomes a champion. The distinctive mark of Christian heroism is precisely this paradoxical relationship between the sacred sphere of devotion and the secular sphere of action within the world. The Christian hero looks to the New Jerusalem as the final end of the community and acts among men to help establish this sacramental reality. "Certainly we shall meet again

and tell each other everything that has happened," he replies to the dubious questionings of immortality voiced by the boys around the grave of the young martyr Ilyusha. It is Christ that has given Alyosha his steadfastness and his courage, his "name" and his heroism—the name and heroism of the God-man.

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## THE MARXIST

he states, must come a revolutionary humanism dispensing with determinism and restoring the more fundamental dialectic of subject and object.

Though existentialism too is based on an abstraction—the "dialectic of existence"—still the turn away from the Marxist ideal hero is another sign of the twentieth-century disillusionment with non-relevant symbols and systems. The abandonment of idealism is part of the return to an awareness of the concrete in man's life—with which comes the possibility of a true hero.

The recent career of Alexander Dubcek demonstrates that a Communist people desire—even against the enforced orthodoxy of Moscow—a real and representative hero.

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## THE ARTIST

cent past. The daring abstract sculpture which brought on riots at the beginning of this century is now gracing our parks in peace, where children scamper over it or recline on its non-representational members. After Joyce there are signs of a profound reaction, a refusal to see the artist as any kind of hero at all. In John Barth's recent novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the modern artist-hero is actually a sort of mock-artist-hero. Ebenezer Cooke is Quixotic in his goal of immortalizing the commonwealth of Maryland as its poet-laureate. He cannot measure up to the deep mysteries of artistic creation or sustain the heroic and patriotic myth of the Renaissance, and his proposed epic turns instead into seventeenth-century satire. From his aspirations as poet-laureate he is forced to take on the task of simply being an ordinary citizen in an ordinary world.

Yet the artist as hero is not an idea which is entirely defunct. The two versions of the artist as a powerful force in society—the proud and haughty aristocrat who defends his priestly function in a hermetic religion of pure insight, and the artist who serves his society

more directly, who lives and breathes in and with it—these two paths of the imagination are best explored in Allen Tate's essay, "The Man of Letters in the Modern World." The poet, Tate explains, is not alienated like Rimbaud nor a deliberate outcast from society like Stephen Dedalus. Rather, the heroic gesture of the modern artist consists of his attempt to achieve the human condition which has, in some way or other, been denied him. If the poet, who is a man of values, is forced to withdraw from modern society, it is because that society is dehumanized, and the poet is, above all, concerned with man. It is in his search for a true image of man that the artist takes his greatest risks. The artist rejects a world which seems all too much like a machine, but the politician, Tate explains, the man who could be a heroic figure, treats the world and manipulates it as though society were a machine. "What modern literature has taught us is not merely that the man of letters has not participated fully in the action of society; it has taught us that nobody else has either." What Tate calls the "plotless drama of withdrawal" is the action of society in the midst of which the poet in mo-

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always a requisite. It was enough that he demonstrate courage and have a praiseworthy objective. And the possession of power over life and death, which was always one of his qualities, did not now, inevitably, take the form of the pistol on the hip: now mastery of a potentially lethal device, the racing automobile or the airplane, would suffice. The harnessed mass and force of Casey Jones' locomotive would qualify. And in John Henry's situation, it was sufficient that he outperform the best that technology had to offer, if he strove until his heart burst in the endeavor.

The early carriers of the air mail were Men of the West. Charles Lindbergh possessed those same attributes visible in the cowboy species. He was tall and quiet, a solitary man making his resolve and keeping it, setting his hand against the unknown and perhaps impossible, master of a machine which could either take his life or span the ocean he had decided to cross. Lindbergh was the last 'horseman,' and even though he rode an iron horse with steel-ribbed wings, it was his own and clearly subordinate to him.

But by Lindbergh's time the contemporary Man of the West was becoming less possible, because of our increasing population, improved technology, and higher level of sophistication. In the depression days the Pretty Boy Floyds and John Dillingers could be raised to the level of the James Brothers only by indulging the untenable presumption that they robbed from the rich to give to the poor. And a Melvin Purvis or a John Edgar Hoover was only an organization man incapable of stirring the same depths of imagination as the 'one riot, one man' Texas Ranger of days gone by.

Of the Men of the West in the late twenties and the thirties, only Admiral Byrd comes to mind. Otherwise, one would have to turn to the essentially contrived circumstances of sport—Babe Ruth, Joe Louis, Jim Thorpe, Jesse Owens. The true contemporary hero must come from life and must surmount obstacles naturally found there rather than prevail in a situation controlled by rules set down by men for games staged by them.

By World War II, the contemporary Man of the West was no longer possible for mature Americans. There were many moments of heroism—Jonathan Wainwright on Corregidor, Audie Murphy's gallantry. But mass movements of men and materials and machinery militated against focusing on the individual. He who might have been hero in earlier times was simply a part of huge concentrations of men. In earlier days this was not necessarily true; the Army of

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dern times has been involved. His withdrawal has, in a sense, been of heroic stature because it has been an assertion of the human, a protest against the inhuman. The poet is, therefore, very much a kind of hero; he is in the vanguard of the few men who refuse to accept a society without human values.

Yet this condition cannot exist for long. The poet must, eventually, draw on values which are a part of his culture. And Tate explains that merely coming out of the ivory tower is not enough. For a Mallarme to write simple poetry is not the answer; that would be betrayal, not accomodation. In Tate's terms, communication is easily had but communion, which is much more than a mere conveying of meaning, is both more vital and more difficult to obtain. The heroic task of the poet is not normally withdrawal, nor is it communication. It is the experience of the human condition which he must share with other human beings. He must make us feel what it is to be a man.

If our culture is humanized again, we will have heroes again. We will neither have nor need to have our poets act as heroes. The poet who can find no one to celebrate except himself is a sad and narcissistic spectacle which no culture can afford for long. The artist was not meant to be a hero, and only a desperate situation can force him to disguise himself as one. Dressed in the raiments of the real hero, the poet is in danger of looking like Aristophanes' Dionysus, in *The Frogs*, dressed in the lionskin of Hercules. He is open to a ridicule that is not altogether undeserved. As society makes a place for the hero it must, for its own health, draw the poet back from his isolation and makeshift identities to traffic once more in the hustle and bustle of a creative culture. By producing heroes who are something more than merely human, a culture gains poets who are more truly human.

Northern Virginia was an extension of Robert E. Lee, and to speak of Jackson was to include his troops as well as his person.

Increased speeds and the great number of planes involved rendered the air ace anonymous. The World War I dogfight thus became the last example of personalized single combat, when our champion went aloft to meet their champion for the protection of our ground or to invade the enemy's territory at ninety or a hundred miles an hour. Then a combatant could know that Billy Bishop was flying that certain plane and Baron Von Richtofen the other one. Speed and thousand-plane raids excised personality from air warfare and substituted technology and mass.

In addition, and perhaps more important,

the American heart which had created the Man of the West became more knowledgeable and critical and therefore much less innocent. Since in the creation and maintenance of heroes, the image rather than the actuality controls, men lost the ability to conceive of living persons with the stuff of heroes.

In the fifties and sixties, space provided the appropriate arena for the Man of the West, but he did not appear. The astronaut, while admired, did not quite attain that status. Although he had many of the other attributes of the hero and certainly was not lacking in courage, he was only one of thousands who participated in a given attempt to pierce the unknown. He was a team man whose function was simply to ride. His movements were controlled by machinery and his decisions made by computers and the men who remained behind on the ground.

The disappearance of the contemporary Man of the West is complete; we cannot point to a single living person who might serve as an appropriate example. He lives, as hero, only within fictional projections of those of the Americans who retain a portion

of their innocence. The very young may still thrill to Superman's leaping tall buildings in a single bound. Sky King can be a latter-day frontier marshal. But in that realm of the possible and the probable, to which the adult is doomed by his loss of innocence, only one contemporary figure remains. He is the truckdriver, that Man of the West who sits well above the drivers of other vehicles and controls and directs many horsepower and tremendous weights. He is not restricted, as is the airline pilot, by men and machines outside his vehicle. To that American, tied to one location, who feels a deep satisfaction in the precision of the construction of a fine piece of machinery and the efficiency with which it performs, that mobile figure who directs his 'semi' to wherever the highways run sups with the gods. And the Man of the West as truckdriver is completely realized when Big Joe, in the ballad of Phantom 309, dies while swerving to avoid a busload of school children and returns, ghost operator and ghost rig, to lend a helping hand to the dispossessed who hitchhike the highways of the Americans.



"American white men have no leaders," declared Adam Clayton Powell at Berkeley recently. Immediately any white man can cite a dozen men whom he respects and trusts, thereby refuting the challenge satisfactorily. But in a less specific sense, Powell put his finger on an incompleteness which has plagued the whole of American society since its inception, affecting Afro- and Anglo-Americans alike.

The New World's first leaders fought for a new personal freedom for men, but the middle-class Europeans who peopled the country were more interested in pursuing wealth with their new-found freedom. Substituting a material hierarchy of values for the philosophical system of Jefferson, Paine, Adams and others, they transferred their natural, inherited longing for heroism to the search for industrial and agricultural conquests, and sought to make themselves their own heroes. Growing at such a rate as to be unstable, America did not have the time and leisure necessary to develop a culture. The rich, after they had gained enough wealth, would concentrate on hobbies or peculiar diversions rather than seek the enjoyment of a high art. The idea of "cultural entertainment" became prevalent. Now that the United States has achieved her goal of affluence, the people have time to seek out the cultural fruits of their labor, to look for symbolification of the things for which they have toiled, to look for a man who embodies their virtues and captures the nation's imagination. So far it appears that they are unsuccessful. Virtuous leaders are not lacking in government, business or science; educators and "culture critics" should be able to detect the first signs of a true heroic figure. Yet between the intelligent and the active there is an arid region where art should flourish in the hands of imaginative men. Perhaps it is arid because those who should sing or tell of a hero are skeptical of the society's worth, or have been taught that endeavors such as poetry were only for entertainment. At any rate Americans have denied the arts for such a long time (and have done so, it seems, out of a lack of conviction in the validity of art, and implicitly of the community) that art itself means little more than entertainment to a great deal of people.

However, a small but significant revolution—a revolution from within—has come to the fore in the last few years. The entertainment field itself is becoming infiltrated with creations of real value, most notably in the popular motion picture and the comic book. It is in forms such as these, written off by the cultural elite as freaks produced by the masses' frustrated desire for wish-fulfillment, that a true folk-art can most easily and unselfconsciously begin.

The comic book arose from its chauvinistic stance in the World War II era through the nation-wide schizophrenia and paranoia of the late forties and fifties. During that time countless strips and magazines flooded the market, and the images of the age which they gave—**Captain America** with its anti-German, anti-Oriental, anti-Russian material; the unattainably divine **Superman** and **Green Lantern** figures, whose lives were a kind of outrageous religion with themselves in the center; the bitch-goddess **Wonder Woman**; **Batman** the hero in a world of trivia—all introduced and prepared a generation of young people for a twisted society of which they would soon have to become a part.

Recently, however, thanks largely to the efforts of Marvel Comics' Editor Stan Lee, some genuine material is appearing in comic book form. Now it is precisely through a medium of entertainment that young people may first learn that the hand of man can set down more than mere amusement—that art, however elementary, is an integral part of man's existence. The heroes in many of the Marvel series are not realistic—that is, it is

obvious that they are products of the imagination, and there are frequent apostrophes to the reader—and yet they are meant to be taken seriously. Neither are they products of an idealistic imagination; they are replete with a conglomeration of faults as well as virtues, and it is precisely their humanness that makes them believable and admirable. Bit by bit the doings of these reverently sketched figures can decondition the young from their inherited materialism, anti-heroism and basic distrust of art. By presenting in a contemporary milieu the values and conflicts as old as man himself, these magazines aspire no less than to create a new mythology, forming the next generation into a generation of believers. Marvel's millions of devotees can accept their heroes as imaginary but not as fantastical, for the ideals for which they fight are not only quite real; the very valor of each costumed crusader attests that they are eminently achievable.

Heroes are made by a whole people, and in this respect the comic book hero will never be a vital cultural image. The creators of comic book figures have never had any pretensions about the purpose of their sagas: it has been for the most part to entertain the reader, to "involve" him visually. A didacticism and overweening moralism grew up in comic books which has only recently met its death—one headstone being the advent of television's "Batman," which was produced (and accepted by those "in the know") in the satirical but zombie-like atmosphere of camp.

The Marvel Comics heroes are a partial reflection of the present climate, which is beginning to reject super-moralism along with super-heroism. Ben in The Graduate is forced finally to shuffle off the trappings of virtue which his parents have already laid out for him—success, status, respectability. He gets the girl he loves, but only as he disrupts some of the old conventions: rescuing her from the arms of her freshly-wedded fraternity man, he wields a crucifix at the pursuing congregation and escapes with his love on a city bus.

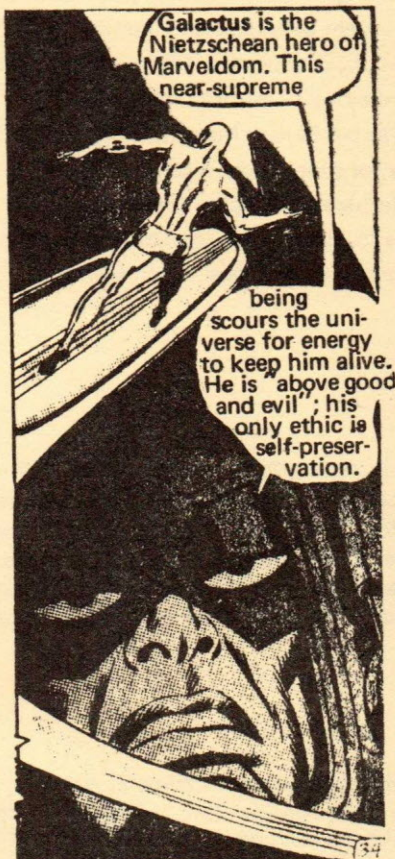
The atmosphere in which the hero matures is one shared by all those around him. The hero is important at any time, because through him a people can gaze deeply into the nature of their situation in space and time. The hero reveals to them the raw material with which he has worked, and shows them what can be made out of it. He gives hope to hopeless conditions. He desires the same things his people desires, but he works with the world which they share, and finally brings about not his separate peace but a common peace.

This "heroic climate" is fostered by the Warner Brothers folk-epic, Bonnie and Clyde. In this tale which evolved from thirty years of Texas legend, a pair of scattershooting adventurers achieve a truly heroic level by following the consequences of their action to the end. It combines a spirit of hilarity and irreverence with moments of high seriousness in a way that only a folk fabliau can.

"Had I a herald—to probe the universe for me—then many worlds such as this would I spare!" So says Galactus to Norrin Radd, a discontented inhabitant of the planet Zenn-La, on whose basic energy the gargantuan Galactus wishes to gorge himself. With this challenge begins the stellar career of the Silver Surfer. Caught in a civilization whose technology has overcome all defects, Norrin longs to strive after the unattainable, to know himself worthy of a luxurious existence; this is his chance, and he eagerly offers himself to Galactus to scout the universe for sources of energy.

Made immortal in his "rebirth" as the Silver Surfer, Norrin Radd is fulfilled in his desire to span the universe. He is

given powers to span space and time, and thus he meets adventures and absorbs the wisdom of ages. Finally, after encountering Earth and signalling Galactus for its annihilation, he begins to suspect the ruthlessness of his master. He faces the destruction of a world which has to some degree befriended him, which has taught him the worth of imperfect beings, and he endeavors to prevent Galactus, protesting, "You cannot destroy the entire human race! They are as deserving of life as you—or I!" Galactus relents, but deprives the space-spanning troubadour of his powers to roam the cosmos.



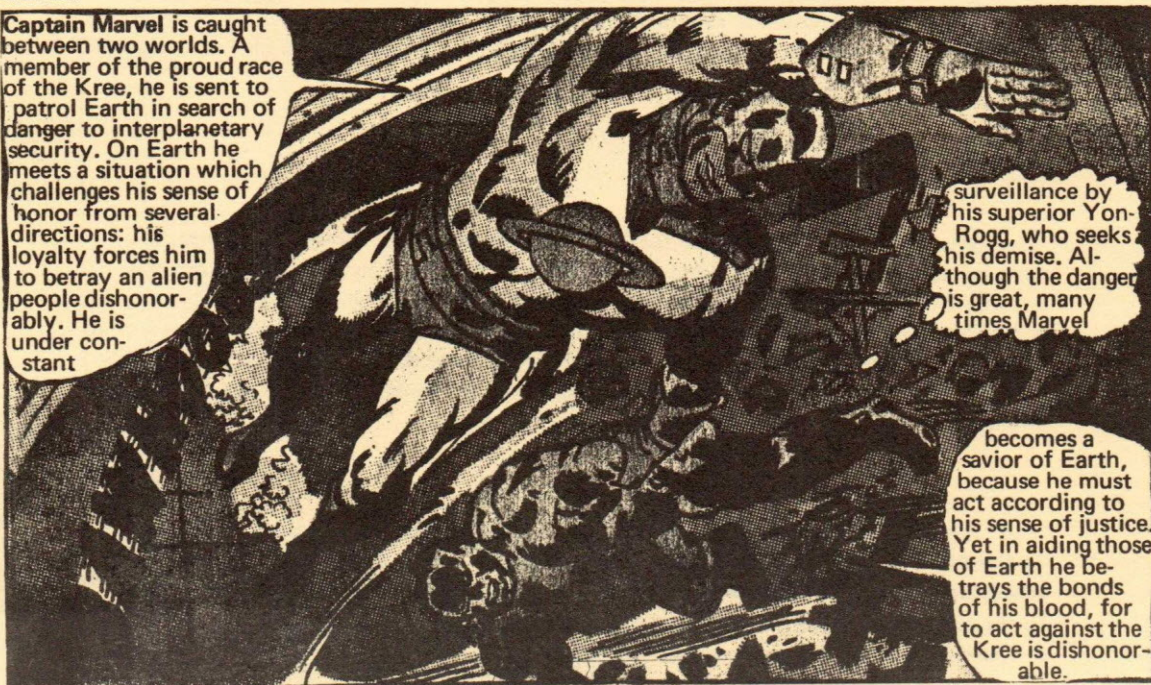
# **SUDDENLY...**

The Hulk appears, devastating the countryside. Pursued and feared by men, he senses hatred and returns it.

Ever desiring to live in peace within a good society, he refuses to compromise—so



Captain Marvel is caught between two worlds. A member of the proud race of the Kree, he is sent to patrol Earth in search of danger to interplanetary security. On Earth he meets a situation which challenges his sense of honor from several directions: his loyalty forces him to betray an alien people dishonorably. He is under constant



Now imprisoned on Earth, innocent of evil, the former mystic of the universe tries to reason with men and make them see the truth, but meets only misunderstanding and hostility. He does not see that it is he who sparks such reactions in men. Like Prince Mysh-

**Doctor Doom** is the Carlylean hero par excellence. Absolute ruler of the monarchy of Latveria, he considers his mission the subordinating of a human race inferior to him in strength and in intellect.



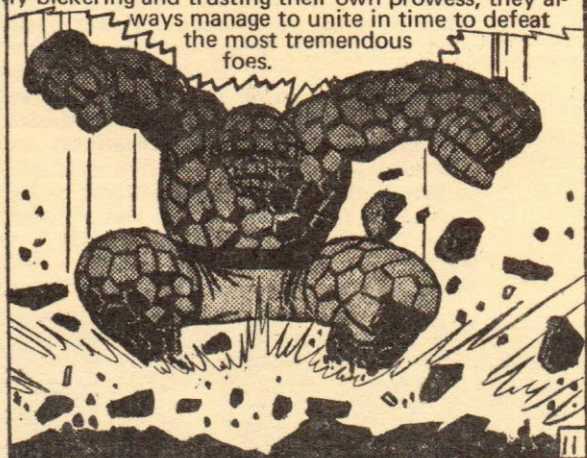
Here he robs the Silver Surfer of his supernatural strength.

**Black Bolt** is the leader of a race hidden in the mountains. He is the epitome of Periclean magnanimity, as well as the deliverer from



captivity. He remains silent, for his voice is so powerful that it could destroy the entire city which he rules

**The Fantastic Four** are scientist Reed Richard, his wife Sue, the Human Torch and the Thing (pictured here)—the most fallible of all Marvel heroes. Constantly bickering and trusting their own prowess, they always manage to unite in time to defeat the most tremendous foes.



In Thor an attempt is made to unite the

contemporary world with an ancient mythology. Though the result is somewhat artificial, it is here that heroic loyalty, courage and magnanimity are most



analytically portrayed. Recently Thor has done battle with a creature so formidable that it was thought to signal Ragnarok—the end of the world and the universal plunge into nothingness.

IS THIS THE FINAL FATE OF ALL WHO LIVE?

IS THIS THE END OF STRIVING... AND OF HOPE?



IS IT BUT IN DESOLATION THAT MAN CAN FIND THE PEACE HE SEEKS?

# Bonnie &

The showing of Bonnie and Clyde in movie theaters across the nation marked the end of an era of film criticism and the rise of a new folk audience. The two desperadoes were viewed by American audiences with the same absorption that, one must imagine, the people of the Attic countryside felt at the bardic narrations of the Trojan War. The film presented its saga with a stark simplicity and evoked from its viewers a blend of compassion and horror; often they filed out of the moviehouses noticeably silent. The experience had appealed to something basic in the audience, something as pitiless and as evident as the fact of death.

This is not to say that Bonnie and Clyde met with unanimous critical acclaim. Since its debut at the Montreal International Film Festival it has been denounced almost as much as it has been praised. It was particularly hounded by Bosley Crowther, the New York Times' revered movie critic, who reviewed it briefly after seeing it in Montreal, labeling it a "wild, jazzy farce melodrama" and indicting it as both sensational and inaccurate. Later, when the film premiered in New York, Crowther had gathered enough conviction to declare that it was a "cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick comedy," asserting that "this blending of farce with brutal killings is as pointless as it is lacking

in taste, since it makes no valid commentary on the already travestied truth." In general the film was fairly well received by critics in both the magazines and large tabloids in both the magazines and the large tabloids—with the important exception of Crowther, who in the past had been able singlehandedly to seal the pecuniary fate of any film he chose.

Initially, both Time and Newsweek condemned the movie. But Newsweek recanted the week after its review, the same writer abashedly admitting to a change of mind and heart. (Time was to publish a cover article several months later on Bonnie and Clyde as a cultural phenomenon, which in effect apologized for its unfavorable review. Both magazines, with the benefit of a few months' hindsight, were apparently eager to clear themselves of blame for condemning a film which would be remembered as a classic.) Letters addressed to Crowther appeared in the Sunday Times, some concurring with him but most of them vehemently dissenting, defending the film and calling Crowther "insensitive" and "blinded by the dark." Two weeks later Crowther, realizing that his views were under attack by an unusually zealous public, was compelled to publish a reply. In it he misread the people's reaction, asserting that they must have seen in Bonnie



# Bonnie and Clyde

## Film sparks Critical Battle; Crowther Resigns



and Clyde a sensitive study of the criminal mind and a "credible exposition of the late Depression years." Assuring the public that this interpretation was not justified, Crowther attempted to detail what the real Bonnie and Clyde were like, in apparent hope of demonstrating the movie's dishonesty in glamorizing them. He somewhat piously remarked that the film would have us believe that "they are not enemies of society, society is the enemy of them," and ended by indicting director Arthur Penn, writers Robert Benton and David Newman, and producer Warren Beatty for "cheating with the bare and ugly truth." Letters followed for several successive Sundays, and the critical furor was felt across the nation. Finally, out of either exhaustion or diplomacy, Crowther retired from his post at the Times.

Crowther's attitude toward the violence in the movie was protested heavily—a typical letter stated, "such violence as there is in the film is necessary and integral to the film's structure"—and much of the mail upbraided him for deliberately misrepresenting the show on the strength of his own convictions. But these conflicts could have resulted from his failure to understand the film in a larger context, or even a failure to understand the nature of art. As great a concept as art is, it is not always directly relevant to the every-

day world about which the newspapers are concerned; without a doubt one may misunderstand art and still mean well. However, Crowther's great misconceptions about Bonnie and Clyde did not stem from mere lack of understanding. They laid bare a whole point of view alien to the spirit expressed in the film, a point of view that conceives of truth as objective exposition of the facts, and of society as mainly a structure of institutions. These concepts are fostered by the over-enlightened American intellectual, who since the beginning of the century has taken over the popular arts and their criticism, winning recognition from the world and patronage from the government. Counter to this position is the knowledge of the common folk that truth is whatever contains human values. Society is formed by the coming together of people with a shared body of beliefs and not merely by a governmental hierarchy. Those who possessed this knowledge perceived truth and beauty in Bonnie and Clyde, and would not sit back and accept the dictum of the New York Times. For the first time in recent American history, the knowledge of the folk, as embodied in a work of art, has dealt a blow to the intellectual establishment's domination of the performing arts.

The distinction between the historical Bonnie and Clyde and the Bonnie and Clyde of the film is difficult to make, primarily because the same process of myth-making that took place in history is to be seen, before one's eyes, taking place in the movie. The difference is that in the film the two are the culmination of the myth for which the actual pair provided the raw material. If Bonnie and Clyde is to be considered a true folk epic—the first of its kind in some seven hundred years—then it is necessary to recognize that the two processes involved in its making are both a kind of art. The first is the making of the myth out of some veritable action which impressed the people as significant (in fact, the heroic action, the heroic demeanor, is a quality to which the people never fail to respond). This action becomes a legend on the tongues of the people, who in its telling insert their values into the event and its agents, enhancing considerably the stature of the main characters without distorting the essential truth of the main action. The second process is that of raising the legend one more step from myth to art, that is, giving it form and making it relevant to all human action. This creative action cannot be performed by the people en masse but must be accomplished by a poet. Just as Homer found in his society tales of the Trojan War and synthesized the Iliad out of them, so David Newman and Robert Benton, brought up in Texas among the colorful legends of Clyde Barrow and his poetry-writing gun-moll, gave form to their filmscript out of this background. Fortunately, their initial vision, essentially true but flawed in many ways in the script, contained sufficient insight and power to interest Arthur Penn and Warren Beatty. On location in Texas, during the making of the film, they listened with growing excitement and respect to the memories and legends of the hundreds of people who flocked to the Hollywood caravan. The myth thus permeated the single artistic imagination in which the four cinematists had come to take part, and that imagination grew to enclose the whole company, incorporating the sensitive acting of Beatty and Faye Dunaway, the camerawork, the editing and the minute and tedious final phases of production. In the end it preserved that same epic movement, quaint rather than grand, but no less noble than that of the high epic, that is characteristic of folk epics; and it produced Clyde Barrow, that imperfect but nonetheless epic figure who is the true folk hero.

When Clyde retracts his head from the interior of the Parker family's car to tip his hat to Miss Bonnie Parker, he is in many respects what Bonnie soon suspects him of being—a cheap, flashy hood. At this stage of his development he is a daring young adventurer without any real depth and with precious few principles. Implicit from the beginning in him, however, is a strange mixture of bravery and genuine politeness, and a desire for an as yet undetermined greatness which he knows he must achieve through violent action. Bonnie, too, though she is strikingly beautiful with a hard, cynical flair, is cheap and small-time in the beginning. She is attracted to Clyde by something more than mere biology, as Clyde soon makes her realize when he jumps out of both the getaway Ford and her passionate advances after their first holdup, declaring, "I might as well tell you right now, I ain't much of a lover boy." He wants her to realize what his life can mean to her, for he knows that Bonnie is possessed of the same yearning as he, and he offers her a means to transcend the living death of their time. The depression that seized the country at that time was more than economic; for the farmers it was a limbo-like state that made them powerless to change or to tend to anything besides survival. Life had lost its meaning and had become a routine. "You go home and think, **when** and **how** will I ever get out of here?" Clyde tells Bonnie in a cafe, "—and now you know." His catalyst is action, and Bonnie eagerly takes him up.

Clyde's peculiar virtues deserve special attention, if he is finally to be attributed a hero. He is obviously not the high hero, as is Achilles, the possessor of the highest qualities of his people. He steals groceries, robs minuscule or even defunct banks, bumps his head on door sills, and barely escapes decapitation by a gargantuan grocer. And yet he does share some common characteristics with Achilles. Cedric Whitman notes in his superb study *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* that "Achilles is actually not complete until the poem is complete." Just as Achilles develops "to a final detachment which is godlike indeed" (188), Clyde's determination grows with each holdup and pitched battle. By the end of the movie he has long since given up a mere quest for fame—he has seen how the newspapers distort the gang's adventures—and seeks a kind of order in a world that is rapidly closing in on the Barrow gang. Achilles seeks to bring heroic order to the turmoil of the Trojan War, and Clyde wants to assert the potency of the common folk, and ultimately the strength of human nature, against material and spiritual depression.

Clyde also grows in love and understanding as the film progresses. Throughout most of the movie he abstains from making love to Bonnie not out of inability but out of a sort of boyish innate chastity coupled with indecisiveness—he is not really interested in women, and he cannot therefore give her his time or attention. The reunion scene with Bonnie and the Parker family opens Clyde to the realization of the possibility of internal peace through love: for the first time he notices a "green world," a spot outside

time and away from banks and the police. At the same time Bonnie begins to understand that the peaceful realm can never be theirs except in fleeting moments. Her mother warns, "You'd best keep runnin', Clyde Barrow, and you know it." Both are touched, and are brought closer to a final understanding. But the consummation of their love does not take place until after both have been wounded in an ambush and Clyde, after rescuing Bonnie, collapses from exhaustion. Their faithful companion C. W. Moss takes them to his father's home to recuperate, and there Bonnie writes her "Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde," a shaggy piece of verse reflecting not their glory but their moribundity at the hands of the police:

Some day they'll go down together,  
They'll bury them side by side.  
To a few there'll be grief,  
To the law a relief,  
But it's death for Bonnie and Clyde.

She reads it to Clyde without regret, and Clyde, overjoyed, confides in her: "You know what you done there? You told my story!" It is then that he realizes his story is one with hers, and he can finally seal their destiny with an act of love. When they finally "go down together," it is with resignedness, but in gaiety instead of sadness. Sharing a pear as they drive down the Louisiana highway, they stop to help old (but treacherous) Mr. Moss change a tire, and the sudden realization that their time is up is mirrored in their faces as they glance smiling at each other. Their vision is one, and their love complete, yet inclusive rather than exclusive of the world.

Clyde's epic quest, a string of bank robberies held together by frantic cross-country escapes, is never in his eyes a battle between himself and society. The outlaw pair remain in the people's care and awe, and share an esteem for the common people whom they encounter. In the course of one holdup, Clyde lets an old farmer keep his cash; later the old fellow declares to reporters, "They did right by me, and I'm bringin' me and a mess of flowers to their funeral." Yet they often express their disdain for "the laws"—their name for the police—and consider them to be against the better interest of the folk. All the opposing qualities represented in the concept of "the laws" are embodied in Sgt. Frank Hamer, a Texas Ranger who is caught sneaking up on them in Missouri. He is mercenary, literal in his interpretation of the law, oppressive in his application of it, devious in method, and vindictive and self-righteous in spirit. He seeks the destruction of Bonnie and Clyde with a single-minded energy, ostensibly because they humiliated him in Missouri, and of course his persistence pays off. But the motive for his resentment goes deeper than revenge. Bonnie and Clyde are of the folk and express the folk virtues, but they break the law because it is not relevant to their vision of the order of things. Frank Hamer upholds the laws that have been legislated and are contained in books, and which are supposed to be for the good of the society. But he is not concerned about the state of the society—as Clyde points out to Hamer, referring to an incident in South Texas in which farmers fought Texas Rangers, "You're supposed to be protecting them from us, and instead we're protecting them from you—now ain't that funny?" The polarity that separates Clyde from Frank is archetypal—something like the Greek concepts of *themis* and *dike*. *Themis* is the public knowledge of what is right, a kind of intuition that is present to some degree in all the folk and passed down through the family. *Dike* is man's intelligent estimation of order, arrived at either from deliberation or revelation, but always imposed on its subjects from a hierarchy. In the natural realm its foundation is human reason. *Themis*, on the other hand, comes from a faculty inherent in man that is broader and deeper than reason, and this is why Eric Voegelin in *The World of the Polis* calls it the "foundations for the actions of the heroes." It is the foundation for the Barrow gang's precarious life work, and the foundation for its justification against lawmen and movie critics.

*Bonnie and Clyde* is a work of folk art in the origin of its plot, in the beliefs that it conveys without stating. As a movie it is popular art because it is a Warner Brothers production and because it was received not with murmured congratulations from the critics but with both exhilaration and disgust on a large scale. And yet if we are to distinguish between high art and low art, or folk art, one point must be that the former is complex whereas the latter is simple. This film, by the mere fact that it is a film, is by no means as simple as the most complex ballad, and its vision of life contains several levels. In an essay entitled "Yeats and the Centaur," Donald Davidson laments the gaps between high and low art that have existed for more than a century. He concludes,

When the subject matter of the popular lore belongs natively to those who make the high art, as much as to the people, and does not need to be hunted or reclaimed; and when the high art is not too subtle and complex to serve as

The legend out of which Bonnie and Clyde grew was native to Benton and Newman, and became naturalized to the other members of the company. Their artifact is complex but straightforward, and by no means esoteric. Its success in America has done much to bring about that future unification of art and lore.

Americans have always been certain of man's basic self-sufficiency; their rugged heroes of history and legend reflect this disposition. To this degree the American ideal opposes the Carlylean; to hold that a super-hero is necessary to save the common people from injustice and entropy is outrageous and insulting. The twentieth-century incarnations of Carlyle's philosophy—Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Peron, Diem—have not fared well in the minds and hearts of their contemporaries—American, European, African, or Asian. World War II marked the end—for two decades in America—of the super-hero. The ambiguity that surrounded Douglas MacArthur has had little to do with his exploits or with his politics. He has been a victim of the profound changes in temperament which have begun to emerge in this decade. It is no surprise, then, to observe the rise of a new kind of hero in the 1960's, embodied in the persons of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, men who were strongly individual yet supremely dedicated. What is worth remarking is the speed and fashion with which these new heroic legends have permeated the cultural fiber of America. More than any other event, the death of John Kennedy in 1963 penetrated America's—indeed, the world's—mythic consciousness, and, diverse as opinions about the President may have been, a whole people participated in the drama of his assassination and funeral. Through his death, Kennedy achieved the stature of a hero and opened new perspectives in America for the heroic way of life. Curiously enough, his heroism did not stem mainly from his deeds, but from his qualities as a person. The nation, through news media, recognized him and identified him as a person. They knew his heritage, his tribe, his history. They were conscious perhaps more than anything else of his youth and took note of his extraordinary aspirations. They saw that he had been destined from childhood to fulfill his desire to be president, a desire that was consummated by a violent death at the prime of his life. The drama of his dying reached a classical level. The assassination of his brother five years later called to mind the saga of a tragically heroic family and brought respect for a member of it who was still too young to have fulfilled his potential heroism. Quite committed opponents of Robert Kennedy said nothing of his "wrongness," but instead acknowledged the passing on of one who, through his heritage, partook of greatness.

The sixties have also introduced, with the expanded use of technology and computer operation, the question of another kind of hero. Could a hero be programmed according to all the known characteristics of past heroes—the prophetic daring of Moses and Christ, the salvific impulse of Beowulf or the tragic power of Oedipus, and the determination of an Aeneas or an Arthur to write new laws for a revitalized civilization? And after these characteristics had been duly taped, punched, and combined, could the computer itself engender such an ideal specimen, uniting parodically with a virgin keypunch operator to produce a new Messiah for an atomic civilization? Such, at any rate, is the plot of John Barth's latest novel, Giles Goat-Boy, a long allegory of the Berlin Wall crisis and of nuclear disarmament which suggests that even a revised New Testament would inevitably lead mankind into the same fractiousness and the same old problems. The new religion of the goat-boy is, whatever may be the intention of Barth's vast satire, not an instrument of peace but of division. Man will always need heroes, he seems to be saying, but the heroic achievement is never final. Only in the imagination can it be complete; the task of rebuilding the present is always to be done.

Who is the new hero? Basically he is the same kind of man as every true hero. His tools are newer and more complex; his ways are perhaps more devious. But in rejecting the odd ideal of the Molochian super-hero cherished by civilization for some centuries, our present culture has been forced to go even farther back in the past than the Renaissance to seek guidance and example. The new hero, if he emerges completely in our time, will not be new at all. He will be part of the long tradition which was disrupted by modernism several centuries ago. What is new today, however, is the emergence of a heroic consciousness radically different from the attitudes of the recent past, a new awareness that only through the imagination—through legend, tales, iconography, and aspiration—can a society find its hero and from him draw a true meaning for its own existence.

**screed** (skrēd), *n.* [AS. *scrēde*.] 1. *Dial.* A fragment; shred; also, a strip or band. 2. *Scot.* a A tearing; rent. b A drink or drinking bout. 3. A long list or discourse; sometimes, a tirade; diatribe. 4. Also *floating screed*. A strip, as of plaster of the thickness planned for the coat, laid on as a guide. — *v. t. & i.* *Scot.* To rend; tear.

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