

The Hero-Complex



Several years ago, the movie *Argo* won the Academy award as the best movie of the year. I enjoyed the movie in that it was a good drama, one that held its audience in proper suspense even as it provided some good humor and banter on the side. But I struggled with several aspects of the film. First, as a Canadian, I was somewhat offended by the way that the vital role that Canadians played in the escape of the USA hostages from Iran in 1979 was downplayed to the point of simply being written out of the story. The movie would have been more honest had it advertised itself as “based on a true story” rather than presenting itself as a true story.

But that was more of an irritation than anything serious. Art has the right to exaggerate forms to highlight an essence. I don’t begrudge a filmmaker his film. What bothered me was how, again, as is so frequently the case in Hollywood movies and popular literature, we were shown a hero under the canopy of that adolescent idealization where, by going it alone, the hero singularly saves the world, alone is the “messiah”, and whose self-sequestration coupled with a certain arrogance is presented as human superiority. But that, the classic hero who does it “his way” and whose wisdom and talent dwarfs everyone else, is an adolescent fantasy.

What's wrong with that "classic hero" as he is normally portrayed in some many of our movies?

What's wrong is that the great ancient myths and a good number of anthropologists, philosophers, and psychologists tell us that this kind of "hero" is not the mature archetype of the true warrior or prophet. The mature savior, prophet, or warrior is not "the hero", but "the knight". And this is the difference: The hero operates off his own agenda, whereas the knight is under someone else's agenda. The knight lays his or her sword at the foot of the King or Queen. The knight, like Jesus, "does nothing on his own".

But this isn't easy to understand and accept. The powerful idealization we throw onto our heroes and heroines is, like love in adolescence, so powerful a drug that it is hard to see that something much fuller and more mature lays beyond it. The obsessive love that Romeo and Juliet die for is very powerful, but a mature couple, holding hands after fifty years of marriage, is the real paradigm for love. The lonely, isolated, unapologetic hero grips the imagination in a way that the more-fully mature man or woman does not: Alan Ladd riding off into the sunset at the end of the movie, *Shane*; any number of characters played by Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger; and, not least, the hero of *Argo*, overruling even the orders of the President in saving the hostages in Iran.

The Nobel-prizing winning philosopher, Albert Camus, in his book, *The Plague*, presents us with what should, by all accounts, be an example of a most-noble hero. His hero is a certain Dr. Rieux who, because he is an atheist, struggles with the question of meaning: If there is no God, then where can there be meaning? What difference does any virtue or generosity ultimately make? Dr. Rieux answers that question for himself by finding meaning in selflessly giving himself over, at the risk of his own life, to fighting the plague. What could be more-noble than that? Few things fire the romantic imagination as does this kind of moral rebellion. So, what could be more-noble than the hero in the movie, *Argo*, going it alone in taking on the regime in Iran?

Charles Taylor has a certain answer to answer this. Commenting on Camus' hero, Dr. Rieux, Taylor asks: "Is this the ultimate measure of excellence? If we think of ethical virtue as the realization of lone individuals, this may seem to be the case. But suppose the highest good consists of communion, mutual giving and receiving, as in the paradigm of the eschatological banquet. The heroism of gratuitous giving has no place for reciprocity. If you return anything to me, then my gift was not totally gratuitous; and besides, in the extreme case, I disappear with my gift and no communion between us is possible. This unilateral heroism is self-enclosed. It touches the outermost limit of what we can attain to when moved by the sense of our own dignity. But is that what life is about? Christian faith proposes a quite different view."

And so it does: We see this in Jesus. He comes into this world precisely as a savior, to vanquish the powers of darkness, violence, injustice, Satan, and death. But notice how, almost as mantra, he keeps saying: I do nothing on my own. I am perfectly obedient to my Father. Jesus was never a hero, a “lone-ranger” doing his own thing while barely concealing a smug superiority. He was the paradigm of the “knight”, the humble foot-soldier who always lays his sword at the foot of the King.

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