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Reproaching the Military Hero Sans Peur

The narrator of the Coen brothers' film *The Big Lebowski* touches briefly on the nature of heroism as he introduces The Dude, aka Jeff Lebowski:

...[S]ometimes there's a man—I won't say a hero, 'cause what's a hero? But sometimes there's a man—and I'm talkin' about The Dude here—sometimes there's a man, well, he's the man for his time and place. He fits right in there. And that's The Dude in Los Angeles.¹

It's as though the film's narrator had toyed momentarily with the possibility that The Dude was indeed a hero, perhaps on the basis of some vague instinct. But then, just as quickly, the narrator discards the notion. Maybe he has a visceral feel that The Dude lacks a mysterious something, some necessary constituent of heroism. What The Dude does have is another quality, a distinct aptness for his environment that allows him to "fit right in there." Even if that's the case, however, we're to understand that such an adaptation isn't real, red-blooded heroism.

And then there's The Dude's friend and bowling partner, Walter, who did a tour of duty in Vietnam. Even now, decades later, his stint in "the 'Nam" colors all Walter's perceptions as he not only bowls but physically battles self-proclaimed nihilists in dark parking lots. Could it be that Walter, the warrior, is a hero in the film? Isn't someone who has fought on foreign soil and who still demonstrates physical courage a better candidate for the title than The Dude? To decide, it might help to have an undisputed hero to serve as a yardstick.

Certainly Pierre Terrail, Seigneur de Bayard (1473—1524), falls into the category of warrior-hero. Bayard was known as *le Chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*: the knight without fear and without any blemish to his reputation. The epithet

seems apt even if a little hyperbolic, for Bayard was enormously valorous as well as militarily effective—so much so that with only 1,000 men he held Mézières against some 35,000 invaders, allowing Francis I to keep Charles V out of central France in 1521.² We might call Bayard an *ideal* hero.

But it has been suggested—by Aristotle and Rousseau, for instance—that perhaps fearlessness is not a necessary quality of heroism. On the contrary, it might be that a hero *sans peur* is no hero at all, or at the very least not the only sort of person worthy of the appellation. Perhaps valor or courage *must* include a rational fear, that is, the sort of fear which a reasonable person would experience in certain situations. But if true courage can be possessed only by a reasonable person—one whose life is guided by the rational faculty rather than, say, physical lust or the desire for money or glory—then maybe only those who possess the other cardinal virtues besides courage can be truly courageous. For reasons which will become clear, we can call such a person an *Aristotelian* hero.

Coming full circle, however, heroism might have nothing to do with courage as a classically conceived martial virtue, in which case there could be a class of *Lebowski* heroes who simply fit well in their own historical contexts but whose personal qualities would not inspire respect at other times and in other places.

It has been claimed that “A man in heroic society is what he does.”³ While the ideal hero is inwardly free from fear and effective in actual fact (again, think of Bayard), the Aristotelian and Lebowski types are defined by identity rather than action, that is, by what the candidate for the title of hero *is* rather than what she *does*. That fact raises an interesting question: Can the hero be exemplary in intention yet ineffective in actual fact? If so, a hero need not be “pure” as Bayard was and thus need not live up to the conjunction in his epithet; it is enough to have certain inner qualities such as feeling fear in the right circumstances.

If we speak in this way about two broad classes of heroes—the efficacious (to which the ideal hero would certainly belong) and the inner (including the Aristotelian and Lebowski heroes), we might ask what it is that’s lacking in the latter class.

To be courageous is to be someone on whom reliance can be placed. Hence courage is an important ingredient in friendship... The other ingredient in friendship is fidelity. My friend’s courage assures me of his power to aid me and my household; my friend’s fidelity assures me of his will.⁴

Even if McIntyre is correct with respect to Homeric society, however, our purpose for the moment is best served by considering inner courage to be robust, that is, to include not only power but the will to use it. Finally, we should attend

carefully to what heroism is *not*. Seeking the essence of heroism in qualities such as an especially stubborn or extroverted courage, for example, is fruitless. That's because our intuitive sense of the heroic is soon transgressed when we consider figures such as Mozart's Don Giovanni, von Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas, or even Castiglione's ideal courtier:

For the courageous are often recognized even more in small things than in great; and frequently in perils of importance and where there are many spectators, some men are to be found, who, although their hearts be dead within them, yet, moved by shame or by the presence of others, press forward almost with their eyes shut, and do their duty God knows how. While on occasions of little moment, when they think they can avoid putting themselves in danger without being detected, they are glad to keep safe. But those who, even when they do not expect to be observed or seen or recognized by anyone, show their ardor and neglect nothing, however paltry, that may be laid to their charge,—they have that strength of mind which we seek in our courtier.⁵

As all of Plato's dialogues arguably are, the *Laches* is aporetic, which is to say that it does not reach a final definition of the concept that it analyzes, namely, *courage*. However, Plato and his voice in the dialogue, Socrates, seem to agree with this statement by Nicias:

There is a difference, to my way of thinking, between fearlessness and courage. I am of [the] opinion that thoughtful courage is a quality possessed by very few, but that rashness and boldness, and fearlessness which has no forethought, are very common qualities possessed by many men, many women, many children, many animals. And you, and men in general, call by the term "courageous" actions which I call rash—my courageous actions are wise actions.⁶

In this passage we notice at once that a very subtle thinker is able to draw distinctions between several qualities. How fine these distinctions are remains to be seen. First we have at least some degree of opposition between fearlessness and courage. Next the qualifier *thoughtful* is applied—not, apparently, to distinguish between courage and thoughtful courage, as though the two were

really distinct, but rather to emphasize that courage is by definition thoughtful. In other words, courage is an activity of the soul that necessarily employs a rational component that in the passage's last sentence is dubbed "wise." Thus at least two of the four cardinal virtues—wisdom (aka prudence), justice, moderation (or temperance), and courage—are inevitably tied to one another. In the middle of the passage we find what seem to be closely related yet still distinct concepts—"rashness and boldness, and fearlessness which has no forethought"—which I won't try to unpack here.

Neither will I attempt to provide a rigorous argument that these views, expressed by the "character" Nicias, are really those of Plato. However, I believe they are and so I'll use the shorthand that offers itself: below I'll refer to Plato's rather than Nicias' distinction between real (i.e., thoughtful or wise) courage and an unthinking constellation of traits that are sometimes mistaken for courage, among them rashness and boldness.

In his most famous treatise on ethics, Plato's student Aristotle writes:

In the field of fear and confidence the mean is courage; and of those who go to extremes the man who exceeds in fearlessness has no name to describe him (there are many nameless cases), the one who exceeds in confidence is called rash, and the one who shows an excess of fear and a deficiency of confidence is called cowardly.⁷

Here Aristotle is typically more didactic than his master, and we have a new element associated with the younger philosopher's well known "Doctrine of the Mean." Aristotle's insight is not just that we are advised to consider courage as a mean associated with the concepts of fear and confidence. After all, even if Plato does not speak explicitly of a mean in the passage above, we can easily imagine the tension he finds between courage and rashness in the form of a visual metaphor involving a line segment having some rough-and-ready midpoint (which need not, of course, be an exact geometric midpoint, and probably isn't).⁸ What is new in this passage is that Aristotle seems to conceive courage as a kind of alloy. In the metaphor of the mean, to be courageous involves avoiding not just one but two excesses on what we might call the "high end" of the spectrum: we must exceed neither in confidence nor in fearlessness (and, to emphasize the obvious, it seems clear that in Aristotle's mind the two are not the same) in order to be courageous. So courage is in turn a *combination* of means.

I point to the alloyed nature of courage in Aristotle's schema not in order to diagram the place of courage on two spectra in such a way that we have absolute

fidelity between the philosopher's prose and a visual representation. Rather, it will presently be helpful to be able to distill courage into constituent parts rather than assume it is, among virtues, monolithic. That heterogeneous character, together with what Plato has already told us about the necessary union of courage and wisdom, opens our minds to a possibility that exercised Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

In 1751 Rousseau wrote an essay or discourse answering a question posed by the Academy of Corsica: "Quelle est la vertu la plus nécessaire au héros; et quels sont les héros à qui cette vertu a manqué?" ["What virtue is most necessary to the hero, and who are the heroes in whom this virtue is lacking?"] Rousseau did not think his essay good enough to publish at the time, but eighteen years later it appeared in print without his permission. Perhaps to make the best of a bad situation he cooperated with a publisher to bring out a new edition of the essay.⁹

I mention all of this only as a caveat, because Rousseau's reluctance to publish his discourse on heroism might signal that he toyed with, more than he committed himself to, the idea expressed in the following passage:

[P]ublic felicity is much less the end of the actions of the hero than a means for achieving the ends he sets for himself; and this end is almost always his personal glory... It is not therefore necessary that heroism be represented by the idea of a moral perfection which is perfectly appropriate to it, but as an aggregate of good and bad qualities, salutary or harmful according to the circumstances, and combined in such a proportion, that there often results from them greater fortune or glory for he who possesses them, and sometimes even greater happiness for the people, than from a more perfect virtue.¹⁰

In his usual way Rousseau is not only cynical but well attuned to how the vagaries of context achieve unintended results. His image of the classic hero—which for him means something like a swaggering martial figure—is of a man who is hugely influential because of personal strength and an energy and charisma that animate his soul and so actuate that strength. The hero is, in short, *l'homme fort who possesses la grande âme*.¹¹ Sometimes these qualities benefit the hero's society and sometimes not; either way, the hero's intention is first and foremost to gratify his will to dominate. In this sense, the swaggering sort of hero foreshadows some of what Nietzsche will later say about the nature of the *Übermensch*. This portrait of the heroic figure is well ensconced in and fascinating to modern American culture, it seems to me, as evidenced by works such as Pressfield's *Tides of War*,

in which Alcibiades will go so far as to leave his native Athens and join its enemy, Sparta, in order to continue his pursuit of power and glory.¹²

But by implication we also glimpse another sort of soul which Rousseau will soon suggest can also be heroic: the truly virtuous man whose primary intention is service to the social collective. Such a hero manifests wisdom as his dominant trait—consistent with Plato’s and Aristotle’s shared sense that the virtuous man must be first and foremost wise. The other virtues are present, but courage must not be dominant. Where courage in the sense of martial valor ascends to primary position, there is no complete, mature virtue. For this reason Rousseau cautions us not “to give to the arms which execute, preference to the head which plans.”¹³

A magnanimous lawgiver such as Lycurgus (one of Rousseau’s examples) is therefore in some sense a truer hero than someone such as Bayard whom we know primarily through his valor on the battlefield. In fact, the highest demonstration of this new sort of heroism might well be to show mercy and generosity to those who are real or potential enemies. The name Bayt al-Maqdis [aka Jerusalem] resonates in the Arab world in part because the Second Caliph, Umar Ibn al-Khattab, is said to have shown great magnanimity to the Jews there. Seeing that a Jewish temple in Bayt al-Maqdis was filled with dirt and therefore unused—it had been buried by Romans years before—the Caliph helped empty and clean the building with his own hands. The account symbolizes the self-perception of Arab Muslims as tolerant and pious; the implication is that even the greatest and most powerful of the community are respectful of other faiths, particularly of Religions of the Book. At the same time, in its modern form the tale rings with indignation at Jewish Israelis’ perceived disrespect for Arabs of any faith and for Islam in general. But most of all it demonstrates the heroism of the Caliph himself because it demonstrates his virtue.¹⁴

The Platonic-Aristotelian suspicion of the fearless man is well exemplified in Anton Myrer’s character Sam Damon, protagonist of *Once an Eagle*. (It is worth noting that journalist David Lipsky, who spent years at West Point and ultimately wrote *Absolutely American* as a documentary of his experiences there, found that cadets at the United States Military Academy still read Myrer’s novel.¹⁵) Sam Damon, unquestionably a hero, is undeniably vulnerable to fear. During a break in fierce action in 1918,

[h]e began to tremble again: a stealthy tremor that began in his hands and then spread rapidly over the surface of his body in a hideous, demonic rash, until he was shaking like a whipped dog. He gripped the splintered wood with all his might, trying

to force back the palsy as a man might shut a lid on a wild animal trapped. But he could not control it.¹⁶

Hemingway's Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* manifests his fear in a similar way. Here he talks to himself as he tries to set an explosive charge:

You're shaking, like a Goddamn woman. What the hell is the matter with you? You're trying to do it too fast. I'll bet that Goddamn woman up above isn't shaking. That Pilar. Maybe she is too. She sounds as though she were in plenty of trouble. She'll shake if she gets in enough. Like everybody bloody else.¹⁷

If Damon and Jordan can't control their fear at moments like these perhaps it is only because they need not do so; when the moment of truth comes, when they must master their fears lest they or those for whom they feel responsible be harmed, they manage to do so. The shaking might even be a sign not of fear but of the fact that fear has been overcome, as is described in Pressfield's fictional account of a battle's aftermath in Greece of the 5th century BC:

All up and down the line, one beheld warriors clustering in groups of twos and threes as the terror they had managed to hold at bay throughout the battle now slipped its bonds and surged upon them, overwhelming their hearts. Claspings their comrades by the hand, they knelt, not from reverence alone, though that element was abundant, but because the strength had suddenly fled from their knees, which could no longer support them. Many wept, others shuddered violently. This was not regarded as effeminate, but termed in the Doric idiom *hesma phobou*, purging or "fear-shedding."¹⁸

Accepting that good, even brilliant, soldiers can feel intense fear but somehow overcome it in battle, *how* they manage to do so remains something of a mystery. Perhaps no one can tell us. The closest Myrer comes, I think, is in this passage:

Inflexibility—it was the worst human failing; you could learn to check impetuosity, you could overcome fear through confidence and laziness through discipline, but rigidity of mind allowed for no antidote. It carried the seeds of its own destruction.¹⁹

As in Aristotle's visual metaphor of the mean, we see Myrer opposing fear and confidence, but his attack on rigidity in this context warrants further scrutiny. Would it not be the epitome of heroism to be rigidly—that is, consistently—fearless? Like Plato and Aristotle, Myer thinks not:

The Colonel checked himself and folded his arms. "War is a—serious—business," he said with great deliberation. "Yes. Serious. That's why I've relieved Merrick."

Damon started. "Relieved him, sir? Sent him down?"

"Back to Blois. Do you feel that's too harsh?"

"Why, I don't know..." He looked at Caldwell uncertainly. "I've never liked him myself, I've never approved of certain things he does. But he's good in combat. He's utterly fearless—"

"That's just it." The Colonel paused, staring again at the mural. "He has no fear. None at all." He pointed at Sam, nodding. "*I will have no man in my boat who is not afraid of a whale.* That's the crux of it. There's something very wrong with Merrick: he's not a *man*. I wasn't aware of it at first; but battle always brings this out. That action at Paulnay Ridge—to expose his people that way, and for nothing! It's perfectly all right with me if he wants to hurry toward his own destruction. Though I shouldn't even say that, he doesn't have that right any more than the rest of us. But he has no right whatsoever to sacrifice good men to this crazy lust or whatever it is. I won't have it." He scratched his scalp at the hairline. "There are only a few like him, thank God—the Cadmus soldiers—and they're more of a menace than a help: if you can't measure danger, how on earth can you evade it? For the Merricks war is not a serious business..."²⁰

This passage shows the infantryman's earthy endorsement and real-world application of Plato's and Aristotle's theoretical assertion that to be utterly fearless is to be less than virtuous and thus not to be heroic. The passage also echoes Rousseau's sense that the strong man who is hell-bent for personal glory manifests only one, and very likely an inferior, sort of heroism; a more robust conception of the heroic includes a certain altruism, a willingness to place the well-being of one's fellows above all else.

It seems intuitively clear that actions in war may be heroic even though they do not achieve a desirable result. That intuition has in fact been codified for more than 100 years in the regulation governing the awarding of medals in the United States military:

The [1892] order [regarding the grounds for awarding various kinds of recognition] went on to establish that the Certificate of Merit is appropriate for men who have saved lives, property, or material, whether in battle or in peace. Braving a fire, the order says, would be an action worthy of the Certificate of Merit. But only if it benefits the United States.

The Medal of Honor, on the other hand, should strictly be awarded for distinguished service in battle. However, and this is another astounding point about this order, “such act of heroism may not have resulted in any benefit to the United States.” Medals have, throughout history, been awarded almost exclusively to men who brought home some victories. But in the United States, this order clearly establishes, valor and honor transcends whatever benefit it may bring to the nation. The battle may be lost, but valor exists even in defeat. The brave action may utterly fail, but that does not exclude it from being honored.

This allowed Gunner’s Mate First Class Osmond Kelly Ingram to receive the Medal of Honor for his action in the First World War. On October 15, 1917, he was on the destroyer USS Cassin, which was hunting a German sub 20 miles south of Mind Head, Ireland. Scanning the sea for signs of the sub, he saw the trail of a torpedo headed straight for the aft of the ship. He knew that if it scored a hit there, it would set off the depth charges. He ran aft, racing the torpedo, hoping to release the depth charges. His citation reads: “The torpedo struck the ship before he could accomplish his purpose, and Ingram was killed by the explosion. The depth charges exploded immediately afterward. His life was sacrificed in an attempt to save the ship and his shipmates...” He received the Medal of Honor for his valor, not for success.²¹

To repeat, all of this seems quite consistent with our intuitions about heroism and how it should be recognized by a grateful nation. Yet if one takes this emphasis on intention rather than result to its logic conclusion, will our visceral sense of the

heroic be shaken? Consider, for instance, the case of Friedrich Nietzsche at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War.

In order to teach at Basel Nietzsche had to renounce his Prussian citizenship “precisely in order to avoid being called away from his teaching responsibilities to serve in the Prussian military.”²² Because of Swiss neutrality he had to settle for becoming a medical orderly. He left Basel in August 1870 for training at Erlangen; by month’s end he had reached Strasbourg, and then it was on to Nancy and Metz. Sent back to Karlsruhe with a trainload of wounded soldiers, he became sick with dysentery and diphtheria. He was released to recuperate in September and would soon turn against important conventions of his society—especially Prussian nationalism and militarism—under the influence of lectures by fellow Schopenhauerian Jakob Burckhardt.²³

But before his disillusionment, one senses in Nietzsche a willingness to engage his nation’s enemy which might, in the realm of intention rather than effective action, be considered heroic. On 12 August 1870, for instance, he writes to his friend Erwin Rohde in Hamburg:

Dearest Friend

I’ll arrive in Leipzig on Sunday the 15th of August and from there the medical orderly authorities will send me where I can aid the wounded, especially in battle itself.²⁴

Before that, on 8 August 1870, Nietzsche the school teacher and college professor wrote to an administrator:

Most honored Herr Rathsherr,

In the present situation of Germany my determination to seek to fulfill my duties to the Fatherland is probably not unexpected. With this intention I turn to you, in order—through your advocacy with the most worthy Education Council—to request for me a vacation for the last part of the summer semester. My circumstance is now in such a way strengthened, that I can make myself useful as soldier or medical orderly without any hesitation. But that I must also throw that meager mite of my personal ability into the Fatherland’s store of sacrifice, that no one will find so natural and worthy of approval as a Swiss board of education.²⁵

Nietzsche is whistling in the bureaucratic dark, of course, but as we know he did manage to get into the war. He goes on in the letter to mention how only the ringing call from his homeland that each do his “German duty” could lure him away from his many obligations in Basel. But as we have seen, the often sickly academician is ill-suited to the rigors of war, and his days of heroic service to the Fatherland come quickly to an end. Does that fact exclude Nietzsche from the genus of heroic figures? Put another way, does intention count for so much less than results in determining who is and isn’t a hero?

The danger of giving in on the point and calling any strong-willed, stubbornly brave figure a hero—independent of what she actually achieves—is that we will again run afoul of the “unity of the virtues” stance taken by Plato, Aristotle, and (somewhat less ardently) Rousseau. Consider, for instance, Mozart and Da Ponte’s character Don Giovanni (namesake of the 1787 opera), a late-18th-century standard-bearer for a long lineage of profligates going by cognate names, from Tirso De Molina’s *El Burlador de Sevilla* (1630) to Molière’s *Dom Juan ou le festin de Pierre* (1655) to Byron’s *Don Juan* (1821). Don Giovanni leads a playboy’s life, seducing astounding numbers of women (1,003 in Spain alone, as the famous “Catalog Aria” has it). A peripheral necessity of such a life is violence—to fend off jealous husbands, fathers, and suitors. Indeed, the opera opens as the don attempts to escape a young woman whom he has seduced in her home. He is surprised by her elderly father, the *Commendatore*, who insists on fighting the don. The old man is killed but reappears in the surprising form of an animate statue, the one gracing his tomb, at the end of the opera. A bookend of sorts, he displays the unified virtues praised by Plato and Aristotle: he is not only courageous—enough so to take on the much younger and more robust Don Giovanni—but appears to have an unfailing sense of justice and moderation that demands he hold at bay the profligate interloper he unexpectedly encounters. He must defend the honor of his daughter and of his house and society, yet he gives the don every chance to repent at the end of the opera.

But of course Giovanni refuses, even though—or perhaps especially because—he faces the now palpable certainty of eternal damnation. Depending on how the opera is directed, it appears that the don is indeed *sans peur*. But that fact only seals his doom. In contrast to his manservant, Leporello, the don is a unidimensional figure whom one hesitates to call sensuous despite his constant pursuit of sex. Returning to the first scene, we meet Leporello standing guard as his master seduces the *Commendatore*’s daughter. The poor servant announces to the audience over and over that he is *la sentinella*, the sentinel, and would love to have a different status. But consistent with the infinitive *sentire*, to sense or feel, to be the sentinel is actually to be superior to Giovanni. Because Leporello can pity one of the don’s heart-broken

cast-offs, because he has in his small way lived more wisely, justly, and moderately than his master, the fact that he has not shown stubborn courage as his master has is hardly a deficit. The opera ends didactically, with a musical admonishment that rakes like Don Giovanni always get their just deserts.

Suppose we understand Mozart's opera to deny that the don is a hero just because of his stubborn refusal to relent when faced with the consequences of (in Platonic and Aristotelian terms) allowing the appetitive faculty to dominate in his life. We might stipulate that if he had been courageous for the right reasons—in pursuit of justice—for instance, we might consider him a hero. That would seem fair enough.

But is it not the case that even the longing for justice may become immoderate and thus a vice rather than a virtue? In Heinrich von Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810),²⁶ the namesake is wronged by a Junker during the turbulent first half of the 16th century in what is now Germany—his horses are unjustly appropriated and starved, and his servant is beaten. Having exhausted all legal means of redress without achieving any satisfaction, Kohlhaas determines to achieve justice by his own hands. His relentless vigilantism evolves into a major peasants' rebellion, and in the end he loses all—his horse farm, his family, and his life. In the course of the civil war for which he was the immediate catalyst if not the sole cause, many innocent people also lose their property and lives. In fact, the town of Leipzig is burned. Yet it is undeniable that Kohlhaas sought justice and energetically risked all to achieve it. Is that not heroic?

In one sense it certainly seems to be. French notes that the “Vikings’ ‘get it done or die in the attempt’ dogged determination is an inescapable theme that runs through both sagas”—that is, *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *The Saga of Burn Njal*,²⁷ and surely there are heroes in Norse sagas. But as we have seen in Rousseau, determination can be of a quietly wise as easily as an audaciously and physically courageous sort. Krappe points out that there is an essential similarity between variants of the Don Juan tale (presumably including Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*) and the Middle English legend of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which in turn was derived from earlier French sources. In both cases a robustly virtuous figure—one who is as wise and moderate and just as courageous—is held up as the archetype of the hero; it is insufficient to be merely brave and energetic and determined, no matter how steadfastly.²⁸ Similarly, Shakespeare's mature King Harry is arguably at his least heroic when he threatens ruin to Harfleur in 3.3 or death to prisoners in 4.7.²⁹

It seems true to say that, rightly or wrongly, our instinct is to associate heroism first and foremost with that kind of courage which we might term martial valor. Yet ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle as well as Rousseau,

a ringing voice from the 18th century, caution us that the matter is not nearly so simple. In particular, we err when we consider courage to be synonymous with fearlessness, for a degree of fear is necessary to what Plato terms “thoughtful courage.” Similarly, we might well be mistaken if we believed that heroism can be manifested only in situations where physical perils are faced. We can conceive a kind of hero whose being is dominated by the virtue of wisdom rather than courage, and we must remember that by the account of many ancients the two cannot exist independently (at least not in their truest forms).

Assuming these observations are productive—that they allow us to see the hero more clearly—they are nevertheless incomplete and liable to overemphasis. For if we do not insist on physical courage as a necessary quality of the hero, or if we do not verify its presence through results on the battlefield and in risky statecraft, we risk committing ourselves to what many would think an anemic conception of the hero—to a figure who, like Nietzsche, is physically unfit to persevere in war, even as a medic.

But perhaps heroism depends less on a reality that can be rigorously codified than on a faith that heroism is real. Laugh at it just once, treat it as an anachronism, as a vestigial but now useless concept inherited from the distant past, and it may evaporate as Byron suggested:

Cervantes smiled Spain’s chivalry away:
A single laugh demolished the right arm
Of his own country; seldom since that day
Has Spain had heroes.³⁰

“What’s a hero?” asks the narrator in *The Big Lebowski*. Byron might have told us that if you have to ask, or if asking even crosses your mind, you won’t ever know. The very question is as ontologically risky as asking “What’s Santa Claus?” or “What’s the Tooth Fairy?” And to attempt to write an academic paper on the subject? A Henry Adams might as well try not just to understand but to *feel* the piety of those who built the cathedral at Notre Dame. Schiller (1795–’96) suggested that certain *concepts* such as the natural are only pale imitations of the holistic *worldviews* which they try to capture.

The feeling we’re talking about is not what the Ancients had;
it is much more nearly identical with that which we have for
the Ancients. They sensed naturally; we sense the natural...
Our feeling for Nature is like a sick person’s sense of health.³¹

I suspect heroism is like Schiller's nature in this regard, and that my reflections will fail to capture the worldview of certain milieus to whom not the *concept* of heroism but the *feeling*, the cultural intuition, was most critical. Contemporary students of heroism and courage have no clear alternative: of course we can only analyze from within our own cultural context. But the cross-cultural analysis itself, moving from our postmodern perspective to what McIntyre calls "heroic societies," cannot be undertaken *sans peur*.

Notes

1. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, screenwriters, Joel Coen, dir., Ethan Coen, prod. *The Big Lebowski* (Los Angeles: PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1998).
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1967 ed., s.v. "Bayard, Pierre Terrail."
3. Alisdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 122.
4. *Ibid.*, 123.
5. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Leonard E. Opdycke (n.p.: Immortal Classics, 1929), 25–26.
6. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Laches, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 140, 197b1-10.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (London: The Folio Society, 2003), 35, 1107b1-4.
8. *Ibid.*, 4, 1094b13–15.
9. David R. Cameron, "The Hero in Rousseau's Political Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45, no. 3 (Jul.—Sep. 1984): 397–398.
10. Rousseau *Oeuvres Complètes II*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Dijon: 1959—1973), 1265; quoted in Cameron 401.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Stephen Pressfield, *Tides of War*. (New York: Bantam, 2000).
13. Cameron, 403.
14. Hilmi M. Zawati, *Is Jihad a Just War? War, Peace, and Human Rights under Islamic and Public International Law* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 99.
15. David Lipsky, *Absolutely American* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 250.
16. Anton Myrer, *Once an Eagle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1968), 127.
17. Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom The Bell Tolls* (New York: Scribner, 1940), 437.
18. Stephen Pressfield, *Gates of Fire* (New York: Bantam, 1998), 129.
19. Myrer, 44.
20. *Ibid.*, 218.
21. Allen Mikaelian, *Medal of Honor. Profiles of America's Military Heroes from the Civil War to the Present* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), xxi-xxii.
22. Carl Pletsch, *Young Nietzsche. Becoming a Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 111.
23. *Ibid.*

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