

Tzvetan Todorov: Facing the Extreme. Moral Life in the Concentration Camps. Metropolitan Books. (Pp. 52-54)

Today at least two ideological models preside over the sphere of human interactions. The first model, a modern version of classical heroism, dominates and suffuses the *public* sphere—the worlds of politics, business, and, to a certain extent, scientific and artistic endeavor. The other model (or, rather, models) governs the *private* sphere—that of personal relationships, everyday life, and moral aspirations. These two models account for the simultaneous presence of heroic virtues (valued in the public sphere) and ordinary virtues (appreciated in the private realm).

How, then, has the heroic model changed? First, the threat of death no longer hovers over the actions of the modern hero; he is not prepared to risk his life to be seen as heroic. The modern hero is no longer an exceptional being of miraculous birth, in privileged contact with the world of gods or beasts. He is an ordinary person, like any other, part of the social fabric. Nevertheless, there is continuity between the classical heroic ideal and the modern one. Take the cult of power, which today seems a matter not of physical power but rather of political, economic, or intellectual power. All the domains where such power is exercised—politics, business, science, art—place a premium on qualities that call to mind the martial virtues: toughness and competitiveness (in negotiations with allies as in conflicts with adversaries), tactical and strategic skill (in concealing objectives, shifting alliances, and predicting others' moves), efficiency (in quickly making the right decisions), and, above all, the capacity to win, to be the best, to see one's way to success. Germany "no longer cites its heroism on the battlefield," writes Jean Amery, "but the productivity that has no like in the entire world" (*Mind* 81). The good politician is the one who wins. This same competitiveness can be found in the arts and sciences. In contrast to the hero who gives his life for his country or for an ideal, his modern descendant does not serve goals that are external to him (in this he resembles his original model, the proud Achilles). The appetite for power is not transitive; it does not lead to anything beyond itself. The quest for power today is not a way of doing good or of serving some ideal. Power is sought for its own sake; it is an end, not a means.

The ways in which modern society, through its symbolic practices, represents human relations illustrates the opposition of the two models, the public (heroic) and the private (ordinary). Just as the heroes of antiquity could not do without glory or without the stories that recorded their exploits, their contemporary counterparts, the heroes of modern political, economic, and intellectual life, would not be what they are without the press, the radio, and, of course, television. Today's fictional narratives tend to choose one model or the other and so fall into two groups, the difference between them roughly corresponding to the distinction commonly made between popular culture and high culture. The first group comprises adventure films, spy novels, and the countless TV cops-and-robbers series; novels and films of the second group reject those thematic standbys. When a war movie glorifies the victors ("our side"), it resorts to the first model; when it explores the experience of a deserter, for instance, or the sufferings of civilians, it relies on the second.

I am not particularly drawn to the heroic virtues, and yet when I think of actual situations of war, I find that my opinion changes. Here I differ from the radical pacifist: if all war were by definition evil, then martial virtues could never be considered good. I believe, however, that these virtues are in fact sometimes good, because some wars are just. From the minute it became clear that there was no other way to contain Hitler, going to war against him became the right choice; in circumstances like these, martial virtues and classical heroism seem to me entirely appropriate. I

expect my military commander to be decisive, not hesitant or defeatist (I prefer Churchill to Chamberlain, de Gaulle to Daladier). I expect the soldier fighting beside me in the trenches to cover me to the end and not desert his post out of fear or indifference. Loyalty, courage, tenacity, and endurance are valued here; they are indispensable qualities.

But war is not the continuation of peace by other means. The fact that many people believe otherwise is one of the major proofs that the history of the world does not obey the laws of progress; so too is the shift from professional armies to total war, from laws of war to the logic of "victory at any price." New situations demand new qualities: sending heroes into retirement once the war is over may be less an expression of ingratitude than a mark of lucidity. After the Second World War, Churchill and de Gaulle were no longer needed; left in power, they might have become dangerous. In normal times, democracy does quite well without these "great men." As Brecht's Galileo says in a burst of true democratic spirit, "Woe to the country that needs heroes."