VICTOR BROMBERT

# IN PRAISE OF ANTIHEROES

## FIGURES AND THEMES IN MODERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

*1830–1980*

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*for* BETTINA — *as always*

*for* JAMES GILL — *in memoriam*

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# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments*
*ix*

ONE
Unheroic Modes
1

TWO
Georg Büchner:
The Idiom of Antiheroism
10

THREE
Gogol's "The Overcoat":
The Meanings of a Downfall
24

FOUR
Dostoevsky's Underground Man:
Portrait of the Paradoxalist
31

FIVE
Flaubert's "A Simple Heart":
Pathos and Irony
43

SIX
Italo Svevo, or
The Paradoxes of the Antihero
54

SEVEN
Idiot Schweik, or
In Praise of Cunning
70

EIGHT
Max Frisch:
The Courage of Failure
78

NINE
The Voice of Camus:
Neither Saint nor Hero
98

TEN
Primo Levi and the
Canto of Ulysses
115

Appendix: Svevo's Witness
139

*Notes*
*153*

*Index of Names*
*165*

# UNHEROIC MODES

*"No monsters and no heroes!"*
FLAUBERT

The title of this book may be surprising. To write in praise of antiheroes could seem ironic, if not downright perverse. The term "antihero," as it has come to be used, is indeed linked to a paradoxical, at times provocative stance. Dostoevsky gave that term currency in the final section of *Notes from Underground*, a seminal work that questions the idea of the hero in life as well as in art. The last pages of Dostoevsky's narrative explicitly associate the word "antihero" with the notion of paradox. The narrator, who is called a paradoxalist, explains: "A novel needs a hero, and all the traits of an antihero are *expressly* gathered together here."[1] The deliberate subversion of the literary model is associated with the voice from the underground challenging accepted opinions.

The title of my study may have been determined by Dostoevsky's self-styled antihero, but only up to a point. The plural "antiheroes" is meant to suggest that Dostoevsky's protagonist is not the only countermodel, and that my aim is not to define a single type, but rather to explore a widespread and complex trend in modern literature. Clearly, no single description or definition will do. Yet eschewing a dogmatic approach and stressing diversity and variation do not preclude a search for underlying patterns and common tendencies. Even though the term and the figure of the antihero are multifaceted, this is not a mere sampling of significant texts. The underlying issues are conceptual as well.

The antiheroic mode, as we shall see, implies the negative presence of

the subverted or absent model. But it is as much a question of mood as of mode. No single theoretical formulation, however ingenious, can possibly accommodate the specific thrust and quality of a given work. Wary of preformated definitions, I have preferred to be an attentive reader and interpreter of the works under discussion, to remain flexible in my approach, and to tease the theme of "antiheroism" out of the individual texts. What mattered to me in all cases was to respect the texture and inner coherence of the works in question.

The lines of demarcation separating the heroic from the unheroic have become blurred. Raymond Giraud, some forty years ago, justly observed that the "unheroic heroes" of Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert were the prototypes of heroes of inaction such as Proust's Swann and Joyce's Leopold Bloom.[2] Nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature is moreover crowded with weak, ineffectual, pale, humiliated, self-doubting, inept, occasionally abject characters—often afflicted with self-conscious and paralyzing irony, yet at times capable of unexpected resilience and fortitude. Such characters do not conform to traditional models of heroic figures; they even stand in opposition to them. But there can be great strength in that opposition. Implicitly or explicitly, they cast doubt on values that have been taken for granted, or were assumed to be unshakable.

This may indeed be the principal significance of such antimodels, of their secret strengths and hidden victories. The negative hero, more keenly perhaps than the traditional hero, challenges our assumptions, raising anew the question of how we see, or wish to see ourselves. The antihero is often a perturber and a disturber. The accompanying critique of heroic concepts involves strategies of destabilization and, in a number of works examined in this study, carries ethical and political implications.

At stake are large issues. Across the ages, the "hero" has reflected, at times determined, our moral and poetic vision as we try to cope with the meaning or lack of meaning of life—much as tragedy, or, broadly speaking, the tragic spirit—answers our deep need to bestow dignity and beauty on human suffering. That is why the "death of tragedy," characterized by George Steiner in a book that turns around Nietzsche's famous title, represents such a momentous cultural shift.[3] One thing is clear, however. Whether it is inflated or deflated, whether exalted or minimized, we cannot do without an image of ourselves.

But what is the heroic temper, and what is this notion of the hero against which so much of modern literature seems to be in reaction? The word "hero," as Bernard Knox reminds us, seems to have had in Homer the general meaning of "nobleman," but by the fifth century B.C. the cult of heroes had developed and become something of a religious phenomenon. Heroes were honored and revered. They were associated with an age

of myth, when men and gods were said to have come into close contact. Heroes were exceptional beings recorded in legend, sung in epic poetry, enacted in the tragic theater. Their characteristics, behind the multiplicity of individual types, are fairly constant: they live by a fierce personal code, they are unyielding in the face of adversity; moderation is not their forte, but rather boldness and even overboldness. Heroes are defiantly committed to honor and pride. Though capable of killing the monster, they themselves are often dreadful, even monstrous. Witnesses are appalled by the "enormity of their violent actions" and the strangeness of their destiny.[4] Whether their name be Achilles, Oedipus, Ajax, Electra, or Antigone—for the heroic concept extends to exceptional women—the hero or heroine is a unique, exemplary figure whose fate places him or her at the outpost of human experience, and virtually out of time.

One might speak of a morality of will and action. Whether the hero fights and kills the monster, rushes toward his own undoing, or proudly shoulders his role as rebel against superior forces, it is through choice and the exercise of free will that he affirms his heroic temper. Prometheus knows it, when he haughtily declares to the chorus: "Of my own will I shot the arrow that fell short, of my own will." Oedipus also knows it, when he blinds himself upon discovering the horrible truth that he himself willed to find out.[5] As Maurice Blanchot put it in an essay on the nature of the hero, heroism is a revelation of the "luminous sovereignty of the act"; he adds that the act alone is heroic. Such epiphanic glorification of action leads Blanchot to conclude that heroic authenticity or substance (he doubts that the latter exists) needs to determine itself through the verb rather than the substantive.[6] In this perspective the "moral" nature of the hero's impetus remains questionable, and the relation between bravery and ethical concepts is not altogether obvious.

The denunciation of the heroic code, a code often associated with war, violence, and the cult of manliness, is of course not new. Voltaire's *Candide* not only depicts war as ignoble carnage (a "heroic butchery" in which any number of "heroes" indulge in high deeds of disembowelments and rapes), but provides a literary critique of the heroic mode. The Venetian nobleman Pococurante explains to Candide why he so dislikes Homer's *Iliad*. The constant recital of fights and battles, the seemingly endless account of the siege of Troy, he finds nothing short of intolerable. But "mortal boredom" is not the chief reason for demoting the "hero" to the rank of arsonist, slaughterer, and rapist. Moral indignation and the hope that his own pessimism about human behavior throughout history might serve the cause of tolerance and justice are at the root of Voltaire's antiheroic stance.[7]

Primo Levi, in our own day, similarly disliked the *Iliad* and for much

the same reason. "I find reading the *Iliad* almost intolerable: this orgy of battles, wounds and corpses, this stupid endless war, the childish anger of Achilles." Levi's hatred for militarism explains his admiration of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, which he considered a masterpiece of world literature. Levi characteristically preferred the *Odyssey*, the epic of homecoming, to the relentlessly heroic *Iliad*.[8]

But even the figure of resourceful Odysseus, for whom Levi had a quite special fondness, tends to be treated ironically and at times with hostility in modern texts. Odysseus, known as *polymêtis* (a man of many schemes), may appear especially attractive to modern readers because he seems to be the embodiment of *mêtis*—a combination of craft, cunning, adaptability, flexibility of mind, skill in all manner of obliquities, illustrating at almost every point the priority of intelligence over sheer brawn and impulsiveness.[9] Yet it is he who in book II of the *Iliad* chastises the cowardly and abject Thersites for hurling insults at Agamemnon and for showing disrespect for the heroic code. And the slaughter of the suitors in book XXII of the *Odyssey* is arguably the goriest and most "heroic" single action in the Homeric poems. In "Penelope's Despair" (which should be read side by side with "Non-Hero"), the modern Greek poet Yannis Ritsos has imagined the fright and frigidity with which Penelope greets her returning hero-husband, appalled by this "miserable, blood-soaked" man.[10]

The moral nature of the hero has been the subject of considerable dissension. Some have held that heroism responds unselfishly to a call of high duty, to a fundamental moral law.[11] But this moral law is not evident to all. Diversity of opinion and contradictions characterize most attempts at delineating the "moral" nature of the hero. Friedrich Schiller believed that the hero embodies an ideal of moral perfection and ennoblement ("Veredlung"). Thomas Carlyle saw heroes as spiritual models guiding humanity, and thus deserving of "hero worship." And Joseph Campbell, in our own day, described the thousand-faced hero as capable of "self-achieved submission," and willing to give up life for something larger than himself.[12]

But there are less exalted views. For Johan Huizinga, the hero was only a superior example of *homo ludens*, projecting in his endeavors the human impulse to excel in competition, and illustrating the "playfully" passionate desire to master the self, to face hurdles and tests, and to be victorious. Sigmund Freud, in a less playful mode, while also stressing competition, proposed a more somber view. In *Moses and Monotheism*, he defined the hero as one who stands up to his father and "in the end victoriously overcomes him," and even less reassuringly (the notion of parricide is hardly edifying) as a man who rebels against the father "and kills him in some guise or other."[13]

A somber view seems to prevail in those works of fiction where the hero is explicitly associated with a world of darkness and transgression. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* not only provides an exemplary title and a central figure who yields to the temptation to "step over the threshold of the invisible," but suggests that "darkness" is the privileged domain of the heroic soul.[14] The affinity between the hero and obscure zones has often been formulated. Paul Valéry maintained that whatever is "noble" or "heroic" is necessarily related to obscurity and the mystery of the incommensurable, echoing Victor Hugo's remark about the legendary darkening ("obscurcissement légendaire") that surrounds the figure of the hero. While nostalgic of heroic values associated with epic literature, Hugo repeatedly called for the demise of the traditional hero, and for liberation from hero worship.[15]

Through exaltation of will, action, and bravery, heroes were meant to be exemplary even when associated with uncontrollable darker forces. They were seen standing high above ordinary human beings, almost on a pedestal, destined to be revered as effigies or monuments for all posterity. The images of the statue and the pedestal may also, at least in part, explain the impulse to undermine and topple the exalted figure.

This study proposes to examine the sundry ways the heroic model—indeed the very notion of a model—has come to be subverted, as well as the reasons that may underlie this trend. Large areas of Western literature have been increasingly invaded by protagonists who fail, by a deliberate strategy of their authors, to live up to expectations still linked to memories of traditional literary or mythical heroes. Yet such protagonists are not necessarily "failures," nor are they devoid of heroic possibilities. They may embody different kinds of courage, perhaps better in tune with our age and our needs. Such characters can captivate our imagination, and even come to seem admirable, through the way in which they help deflate, subvert, and challenge an "ideal" image.

Primo Levi, as we shall see, praises the antihero—the "eroe a rovescio"—for his allegiance to the strictly human dimension. Levi is evidently not the only one to be suspicious of hero worship and to denounce it for fostering illusions, dishonesty, and moral inertia that come from relying on ideal and inimitable models. But this critique of vicariousness implies the diagnosis of a moral void as well as the paradoxical nostalgia for heroic values and models no longer found relevant.

A void of this sort cries out to be filled. This is one of the hypotheses of this study. The ironic memory of the absent or unattainable model acts as a steady reminder and as an incentive. The very notion of the "antihero" depends on such a memory. Herbert Lindenberger put it well when he observed that the antihero is possible only in a tradition "that has already

represented real heroes."[16] The reason is that such a memory acts as more than a foil; it suggests a yearning, perhaps even a quest. In an age of skepticism and dwindling faith, an age marked by the pervasive awareness of loss and disarray, the deliberate subversion of the heroic tradition may betray an urge to salvage or reinvent meaning. The negative assessment does not prove resignation or assent. An absence can be a form of presence. To put it in other terms, some of the most characteristic works written in opposition to traditional heroic models may well reflect a moral and spiritual thrust, as well as an attempt to adjust responsibly to new contexts.

The chapters that follow will thus unavoidably deal with some of the troubling tensions of our time: conflicts between individual and collective values, thematic and historical discontinuities, resistance to conformity, radical questionings of authority, attempts at new empowerments as well as their subversion, critiques of rationalism and traditional humanism together with the emergence of less smug "humanistic" reaffirmations of the human spirit in terms of unheroic resilience and tenacity.

The authors studied all raise moral issues through the antiheroic perspective. They challenge the relevance of handed-down assumptions, induce the reader to reexamine moral categories, and deal, often disturbingly, with the survival of values. Survival and renewal, at times in a conflicting manner, are at the heart of these radical texts. Strength that takes the form of weakness, deficiency translated into strength, dignity and hidden victories achieved through what may appear as loss of worth, the courage of failure experienced as the affirmation of fundamental honesty—these are some of the paradoxes underlying not only the writings of Gogol, Flaubert, Italo Svevo, and Max Frisch, but those of the other writers under discussion.

Georg Büchner (1813–37), the first author discussed, is surprisingly modern in his willful undermining of the idiom of tragedy. Yet through his pitiful Woyzeck, who lives out a destiny of victim and loser, Büchner reaches out to universal man, and retrieves tragedy in an unheroic context. Nicolai Gogol (1809–52), in "The Overcoat," also deals with serious themes by portraying a meek and derided scapegoat protagonist, a downtrodden creature whose story raises social, moral, and even spiritual issues, but in unsettling terms, through satire, pathos, parody, narrative instabilities, and mutually canceling ironies.

*Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) is an altogether crucial text in the antiheroic tradition. A disparaging self-portrait

of a moral cripple who blackens himself on purpose and loves his infirmities, this first-person narrative displays the relentless will to be outside of the norm and in opposition to it. Vilifying the word as well as the concept of hero, Dostoevsky's underground voice—aggressive, intransigent, self-centered, neurotic, at times strident—cries out an indictment of a "negative age" that has lost its sense of values. In denouncing materialistic rationalism, this voice takes on almost prophetic tones. The adversarial consciousness that speaks out from below is, however, that of a *sick* prophet. But, ultimately, the textual strategies that exploit the duplicitous resources of the confessional mode convert the negative into the positive, conveying the experience of intense spiritual needs.

Flaubert's simple-minded servant Félicité, a distant relative of Büchner's Woyzeck and of Gogol's Akaky Akakyevich, is even further removed, if possible, from any heroic model. In "A Simple Heart," Flaubert (1821–80) has conceived a character incapable of conceptualizing anything, unaware of her own courage, and totally unable to see herself in any "role," least of all a heroic one. Yet her self-denial, her devotion, her ability to commune in suffering, and above all the author's complex handling of irony, transform emptiness into plenitude, allowing Félicité to attain a legendary status. The latent hagiographic thrust of the story may even be understood as related to the author's own deepest yearnings.

With Italo Svevo (1861–1928), we encounter almost the opposite type of antihero—highly articulate, self-reflective, hyperconscious to the point of morbidity, suffering from the inertia of the dreamer and self-mocker. Ironic modes stress the sense of failure and marginality. The typical Svevian protagonists cultivate their inadequacies, and indulge in passivity and procrastination to the point of paralysis. *Confessions of Zeno*, Svevo's most characteristic work, is a humorous and also moving narrative about the incurable wound of consciousness. But in this fictional world in which the only tragedy seems to be the absence of tragedy, strange reversals take place. Zeno discovers that the consciousness of his weakness is his true strength, that ironic lucidity can convert defeat into victory.

The case of the good soldier Schweik seems at first glance to fall squarely in the category of caricature—though it soon becomes evident that this caricature is far from simply entertaining. The Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923) succeeded in giving the droll silhouette of the cunning army orderly, who serves in the Austrian Army during World War I, a legendary dimension as an unheroic yet rebellious survival artist in a jingoistic world gone mad. Disarming, resilient and resourceful, simulating submissiveness, Schweik uses his feigned feeble-mindedness in a permanent combat against authority. This feeble-mindedness must not be

taken at face value. A true subversive, Schweik is a perturber energized by moral indignation who speaks and acts for the downtrodden, conveying a lesson not only in unheroic courage, but in strategies of passive resistance especially valid under oppressive political regimes.

Hostility to the heroic, in the wake of war and mass extermination, also marks the works of Max Frisch (1911–91). Conscious of the epic and tragic tradition, very much aware that heroes allow us to experience vicariously the exercise of free will and the high drama of fate and action, Frisch unwaveringly exposes the harm done by the heroic illusion. His antiheroic stance—in his plays, novels, and literary diaries—has moral as well as political implications. The concept of the hero is shown to provide lessons of false freedom and dangerous models in history. By contrast, what Frisch considers the nonheroic virtues embodied by the self-doubting, self-denying, and even humiliated figures in his works raises his characters to new levels of consciousness. Frisch's most significant texts lead to a positive revelation of the finite: the moving acceptance of failure and human limits, the value of the prison of inner life, the love of human fragility, the desperate will and courage to embrace life.

The themes of courageous lucidity and allegiance to the strictly human dimension are at the heart of the writings of Albert Camus (1913–60). Pressing home the point that heroism is not, after all, a supreme value, suspicious of heroic attitudes and heroic rhetoric, Camus shows himself from the outset more interested in how weakness can be transformed into strength, how negation can be converted into affirmation. At stake is the fragility of any victory in the context of never-ending defeat. Camus's entire work reaches out to nonheroic forms of courage and to values predicated on horror of violence, distaste for doctrinaire abstractions, and a refusal to seek absolutes. Finding both hopelessness and exhilaration in the sense of mortality, Camus resorts to the mythical metaphor of Sisyphus in order to justify a commitment to a struggle that requires relentless vigilance precisely because a definite victory can never be achieved. Camus's tragic humanism, which takes the side of victims (never of "heroes" or "saints"), implies the concept of the witness in its noblest and most engaged sense.

Primo Levi (1919–87) illustrates perhaps better than anyone else the extent to which the witness has assumed priority over the hero. One large question looms over most of Levi's work: What can heroism possibly mean in an age of totalitarian ideologies and death camps, where naked bodies are herded to the gas chambers? Heroic models and heroic expectations are shown to be illusory and misleading. Offended by any rhetoric that might present the victim as hero, Levi is interested rather in what he calls

the "gray zone" of moral contamination, as well as in the difficulty and shame of survival. His main concern is not physical, but moral survival. In this attempt at salvation, writing and testifying take on a redemptive value. Heroic longings may have led Levi to write a prize-winning novel about Jewish partisans in World War II, but his guerrilla fighters, men and women alike, are tired of war and heroism. Levi's chief hope is related to the metaphor of a homecoming (hence his attachment to the figure of Ulysses), and to the search for the courage needed to face the daily struggle against despair.

The writers discussed in this study belong to several distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. In all cases, I have based my analyses on close readings in the original language. Some chapters deal with a specific work, others with a large body of writings. These chapters can be read as independent essays only insofar as they respect the specific and unique voice of each author. They all address common problems, and have all been conceived from the start as integral parts of this book. But I have been careful to avoid a definitional scheme or method of approach, preferring instead to remain attuned to individual authors and works, and to cast light on an array of complex, yet related subjects.

## 2

# GEORG BÜCHNER

### THE IDIOM OF ANTIHEROISM

Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, more than a century and a half after it was left unfinished in 1836, remains a baffling and astonishingly modern text. Even the intended sequence of the completed scenes remains uncertain. Büchner died at the age of twenty-three, without a chance to make revisions and crucial decisions about the structure and ultimate thrust of the play. *Woyzeck* was not "reconstructed" until some forty years after Büchner's death, and was not performed until another forty years had almost elapsed—in Munich, in 1913. Basic editorial and dramaturgical questions have remained unresolved. But the untimely death of the author is only a contributing factor to the unconventionality of the play. Structural discontinuities are part of Büchner's theatrical strategies.

So are the dramatic and psychological discontinuities that frustrate expectations of reassuring developments and resolutions. There is indeed much here to disturb both spectator and reader. Not only is the protagonist downtrodden, inept, and humiliated, but the techniques of fragmentation and disjointedness bring out a stark cruelty made worse by dehumanizing stylizations of human despair.

Various modern aesthetic schools have hailed Büchner as a bold precursor and an inspiring model. Historians of the theatre like to link his name to such diverse artistic manifestations as naturalism, impressionism, expressionism, or the epic and proletarian drama.[1] Such proposed affinities may be suggestive, but specific affiliations can be misleading. More significant are some of the striking features responsible for the uniqueness of Büchner's achievement: fadeouts and sudden changes in setting and pace