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Antiheroes and Villains as a Phenomenon in Literature and Popular Culture in the Post-heroic Era

Antihéroes y villanos como fenómeno en la literatura y la cultura popular en la era Post-heroica

Anti-heróis e vilões como fenômeno na literatura e na cultura popular na era Pós- heroica

Translated by Florencia Coronel and Evangelina Guerra, Universidad de Montevideo.

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Introduction

It is impossible to talk about the antihero without thinking about the hero. The antihero and anti-heroism manifest an intuition of rebellion against heroes and heroism, the cause of which is worrisome insofar as it attacks the very heart of ethics. From this point, we could identify several traits of anti-heroism: anarchy, divergence, paradox, and the defensive-reactive, given that the antihero fights while defending himself against the natural urge for strenuous self-improvement. And indeed, according to Max Scheler,¹ the hero is the personification of what is noble—that is, the sum of all excellences and virtues, not only purely spiritual, but vital-spiritual.² Such excellence can ultimately prove dazzling.³ This is probably the very thing that the antihero either does not pursue or cannot attain.

In the best of cases, the antihero can also be, in itself, a lesson of unexpected exemplarity, a fact, in the sense that Scheler expresses. In this case, the antihero would be a reformer. When confronted with a model that has been proven false, insufficient, the antihero intends to re-mystify the initial hero, rescuing the essence of his mission. His main function is to reform it. In this context, the heroic mission is left between brackets for the time being. Meanwhile, a deformed and unconvincing image emerges, getting away from the bright greatness of the hero. Contradictory as it may seem, this poor man (or woman) that is the antihero remembers that the hero is always reinventing himself. In his clumsy imitation, the antihero is determined to be noble again despite the ridiculousness of his attempts. This is, without a doubt, the myth of Don Quixote. Ordine says that the mythical Don Quixote could be considered a quintessential hero of uselessness. Fed by cavalry novels, he decides to force the corrupt reality of a time when vice is defeating virtue.⁴ Don Quixote has perceived this social vice and, when faced with the lack of virtue around him, chooses to imitate the heroic action, erring on the form. Even though his judgment seems mistaken, his intentions are profoundly noble. For this, he will be called idealist. According to Scheler, he proves himself to be the intrepid one that charges into the unknown and

1 Translators' note: All quotes have been translated from Spanish into English (paraphrasing) by Florencia Coronel and Evangelina Guerra.

2 Max Scheler. *El santo, el genio, el héroe*, trans. Elsa Tabernig (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1961), 133-134.

3 Andreas Gelz, "El esplendor del héroe: el héroe y su espacio", in *El renacer del mito. Héroe y mitologización en las narrativas*, coord. Ruth Gutiérrez Delgado (Salamanca: Comunicación social, 2019).

4 Nuccio Ordine, *La utilidad de lo inútil*, trans. J. Bayod Brau (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2013), 67.

gains new territory for life.⁵ In this issue, an article offers new readings from three philosophers about the Knight of the Sad Countenance, understood as a modern hero or antihero, a man exiled from the world,⁶ proving the current relevance of the quixotic myth. That new model is explored in one of the articles dedicated to the new actantial model of the antihero: the concept of antihero seems to position itself in the tense space between the poles of hero and villain, meaning that, according to Freire Sánchez and Vidal Mestre (2022: 262), it would have things in common with both poles.⁷ When questioning it and appearing under camouflage with an unexpected image for its contemporaries—witnesses to this mythification—the antihero earns society's trust, progressively and in collusion with those that tell his story. As explained in the article about the “live” mythification of Lincoln, the statesman, in the hands of journalist Karl Marx, heroization can also be the product of a mythification process lived through and reported by contemporaries actively in the present.⁸

Against What Cause Does the Antihero Act?

From Antiquity to the present day, the study of heroes has been part of *anthropeia philosophía* or the philosophy of human things. Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Gracián, Vico, Carlyle, Schopenhauer, Scheler, and Guitton, among others, have all written extensively about the ethical, political, and mythical nature of heroic action. This demonstrates an interest in three remarkable aspects of heroic ways of acting in real life and its implicit manifestations in stories: the perfecting of nature, the relational appearance of said perfecting, and the narrative-discursive element. These are the pillars that will support the building of heroic culture that has reached our time in various ways.

Some of these authors have tried to explain the nature of what is heroic, searching for the root causes in philosophical anthropology. But the heroic action and “fact” are the result of a magnificent relationship between Truth and personal will (virtue, the Greek *areté*) narrated in mythologies and heroic

5 Max Scheler, *Op. cit.* 135.

6 Juan Manuel Ruiz Jiménez, “Don Quijote, héroe para sí mismo, antihéroe ante la sociedad. Pensar la experiencia existencial moderna del Don Quijote de la Mancha desde tres filósofos contemporáneos”.

7 Sebastián Moreno, “Semiótica del antihéroe contemporáneo: modelos actanciales y axiologías subyacentes al cambio paradigmático de lo heroico”.

8 Gabriel De-Pablo, “Un antihéroe para la historia: Karl Marx y la mitificación de Abraham Lincoln”.

myths. In contrast with this aching for knowing human nature from its root, an opposing movement is born. Retrospectively, it is the first glimpse of anti-heroism, even though it is not formulated that way, for this model, unchained from truth, will not only affect thinking—in the manner of understanding man and ethics—but also stories. We are no longer scandalized by thinking that sophists would promote efficacy in culture and business, political and economic, through the strategic use of language. This can be observed most prominently in the rise and fall of historical figures through the construction of national and folk history, as well as romantic ideas of myths. This is how the so-called “hero worship” (or idol worship) works.

Within the context of the sophists’ interest, the heroic myth is separated from philosophical reason and is now of pragmatic interest. This is why it is linked to a proto figure of a *super-man*, where what is “good” is not found in truth, but rather in the will of power, in a form of autonomous subjectivity. With this deviated focus, a big part of the process of what we call heroification will happen pursuant to historical circumstances and political needs, and according to the taste, traditions, convenience, and interests of each period. This model clashes with the ideal of excellence that every human aspires to when making an effort. Therefore, as argued in another article of this issue dedicated to the political failure of liberalism in the film *Watchmen* (2009), heroism is subject to social change.⁹ This paper shows how superheroes end up becoming antiheroes when they become overwhelmed by the demands of a society that has abandoned them. Their views of hero disenchantment and moral ambiguity do not make them abandon their fight: they transform it.

When confronted with the creative strategy of proposing stereotypes, the heroic myth will continue being alive, especially in crisis situations and in communities, like families, where sacrifice tends to be the sudden rule of coexistence. On another hand, paradoxically, the sacrificial ideal and the common good has been established in the most superficial layer of public discourse: “it looks good to seem nice.” This is another motive for the appearance of the antihero: to unmask the false hero. This is probably the argument that, in particular, the protagonists in many of John Ford’s westerns embody. From a sociological point of view, the problem turns fuzzy. From an ethical point of view, the possibility of knowing how to be better by combining the two levels of what is heroic—the heroic myth and the “heroes” that each culture creates for itself—vanishes. Nietzsche himself

9 Agustín Rodríguez Hernández, “Antihéroes: máscaras de la sociedad”.

recognizes the strength of a hero's courage. This is why, knowing the subject he wants to annihilate and with sarcasm, he says that in all ages there have been attempts to "better" man, and this was as the definition of moral.¹⁰ Clearly, the post-heroic age is still committed to dismantling heroism, understood as a sign of the weakening of human nature, as coined in Nietzschean moral. However, when dealing with the antihero, the struggle of the post-heroic age is more subtle and distant. The goal is not to purify the idealizing gradient of the heroic ideal, proposing a moral outsider that seeks Justice, but rather to disregard any impulse of personal progress that places some over others. The post-heroic age is the direct descendant of the post-truth age. Therefore, the proposal made from the analysis of the film *V for Vendetta* (2005) in regard to anti-heroism is worth reflecting about: anti-heroism breaks, with its exposition, with the so-called hero's journey proposed by Campbell, but also with the uniformity of a universal good that includes society and its subjects.¹¹ That rebellion against the system is a symptom rather than a cause for the decadence of a world that asks to be renovated and rescued from its disenchantment. How it affects narratives is also interesting when regarded as configurators of mentalities.

New and Old Heroic Mythology

Heroes, regardless of whether they are real people or not, and the stories that talk about them exist. These intentional narratives and heroic myths are the representation of what is heroic. It is in public discourse where the hero conquers the territory of his social reputation, becoming influential as a public role model. Therefore, it is also relevant to be aware of heroization processes and how they are generated through poetic mythification. According to Reyes, heroes' stories are characterized by what is memorable. However, let us not forget that Reyes tackles heroes within Greek mythology. There they appear as earthly creatures and, initially, mortal, something like patron saints of people and places. Regarding the attributions that are their own—and without getting into details about the origin of the hero—,¹² Reyes (like

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Crepúsculo de los ídolos* (Barcelona: Plutón, 2025), 54.

11 Evangelista Ávila, "A la sombra del heroísmo en *V for Vendetta*: Complicidad y concepto del anti-heroísmo".

12 Ruth Gutiérrez Delgado. "El origen del héroe: nacimiento, misión y necesidad", en *El renacer del mito. Héroe y mitologización en las narrativas*, coord. Ruth Gutiérrez Delgado (Salamanca: Comunicación Social, 2013).

Scheler) centres on fierceness and extreme love.¹³ These descriptions of a dynamic and energetic masculine spirit point towards Greek mythology as the origin of the ancient Greek term ἥρως (hērōs). In this context, the hero and protagonist are identified. However, a deep study into the matter reveals this may not be as simple as it seems. Among other things—as it will be pointed out in two of this issue’s articles—because feminine figures should also be reclaimed in their original contribution to the Olympus of heroism. María Zambrano herself highlights the idea of “loss” and “downfall” as feminine heroism traits in examples of Greek heroines, and adds a privileged path to show another way of being and of embodying the tragic dilemma between fate and freedom.¹⁴ In an attempt to maybe better understand other ways of conceiving this representation of the feminine in the world of comics and superhero movies, Harley Quinn’s deconstruction stands out (as explained in the article about her¹⁵).

In a tradition that considers that poetic discourse has the power of serving as an example,¹⁶ the hero must be the protagonist of the story. However, when stories are also anti-heroic in a poetic sense, its protagonists do not have love for good or justice: in the beginning, they can engage with interests or with nothing. In fact, in the middle of the 20th century, the subject of the hero ends in silence. In conversation with thinker Jean Guitton, the claim was that, at that moment in history when heroes, geniuses, and saints had disappeared from the main plane of existence in the cultural stage,¹⁷ that was when their existence was most important. In a post-heroic age, widely described by Bröckling, the dismantling—an elegant destruction—of the hero is done even more aggressively, given that there are new sprouts of a growing retrieval of the heroic spirit. In fact, as explained in the article regarding the semiotic of the antihero, the figure of the antihero, extremely popular in our time, does not deny the heroic structure, but reveals it in light of the challenges faced due to the changing Zeitgeist. The most problematic part is that in a good number of shows—about drug lords and true crime, among others—this

13 Alfonso Reyes. *Obras completas de Alfonso Reyes. Los héroes. Junta de sombras. XVII. Letras mexicanas* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), 27.

14 Ethel Junco, “María Zambrano y la forma antiheroica del saber. La poética del descentramiento a través de Antígona, Perséfone, Diótima y Casandra”.

15 María Ruiz Ortiz, José M. Lavín y Arnau Vilaró Moncasí, “Harley Quinn: hacia una nueva representación femenina anti-heroica”.

16 Ruth Gutiérrez Delgado, “El protagonista y el héroe: definición y análisis poético de la acción dramática y de la cualidad de lo heroico”, *Ambitos: Revista Internacional de comunicación*, no. 21 (2012): 43-62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/Ambitos.2012.i21.03>

17 Jean Guitton, *El héroe, el genio y el santo* (Madrid: Editorial Complutense, 1995), 9.

antihero has been transformed into the heroic antagonist that faces villains, who are also, in turn, transformed into protagonists of the story, in a clear moral case of relative evil. To better understand how these representations of the heroic change, one should study Herder's idea of the myth as the expression of the people's spirit (*Volksgeist*).

Problematic Matter

Given the aforementioned reason, the heroic issue has become problematic. Is it possible to define the hero with a universal concept? Or is it tied to each culture's values, to the people's spirit, or to each narrative genre? Nee argued that morality was a matter of values, or a system of values, customs, traditions, and beliefs shared by the same society, which can be distinguished from other value systems. The fact of being subject to change makes moral the transformative aspect of culture, something that may contradict ethics.

"This field is a field of values. When we are talking about morals we are talking about certain kinds of values. But there are many other kinds of values and evaluations other than those with which morals are concerned. An attempt must be made to determine the particular kind of values which we call moral values."¹⁸

Thinkers like Meletinsky¹⁹ distinguish between cultural heroes, mythological heroes, and hero-*heroes*. Regarding the widespread belief that each society creates its own heroes, it would be useful to answer exactly what level of excellence and contingency these role models achieve. Goren explains it this way:

"The heroes created out of national catastrophes are a barometer of the collective's moral and emotional state and conflicts. How the image of the hero evolves over time tells us more about the psyche of the society at any given moment than about the individual or group identified as the hero."²⁰

18 Harold N. Lee, "Morals, Morality, and Ethics. Suggested Terminology", *International Journal of Ethics* 38, n° 4 (1928): 450-466.

19 Eleazar M. Meletinsky. *The Poetics of Myth*, trans. Guy Lanoue and Alexandre Sadetsky (New York: Routledge, 1998), 207.

20 Elizabeth Goren, "Society's Use of the Hero Following a National Trauma", *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 67, (2007): 37. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ajp.3350013>

For example, Scheler offers a distinction and a hierarchy that connects with Aristotle's *Poetics*. It seems to answer the problem of double-levelled heroism, emphasizing common features, but also pointing out that, since the "hero is in its deeds", each nation and each culture has its own heroes. There is a cultural hero and there is a hero. Generally, each society tends to imitate the patterns that embody established moral values, i.e., what convenience considers a shifting reflection of tradition. However, the true hero—like in the Aristotelian *mythos*—has an imperishable condition, an extraordinary greatness that proclaims universal human values. Differentiating which of these elements (cultural, mythical, and ethical) are present in the heroic narrative and in what way makes imitation difficult.

Even though Bentley said that in the villains' and heroes' fantasy—which is also the fantasy of melodrama—the heroes' triumph is taken for granted,²¹ neither the reunion between the protagonist and the hero is necessary, nor triumph is guaranteed. Taking on the leading role in a story does not always mean being the hero of the story. Maybe this is why, in postmodernity, the matter of the the hero remains relevant. In a context of rebellious appropriation that diverges from classic models of heroism, the protagonist is no longer the hero of the story, giving rise to substitutes such as the antihero or the villain. These transgressions of poetics are not harmless. Because, as Kadiroğlu indicates, "the notion of 'hero' sets the base for 'antihero'."²² This same author sets the development of anti-heroism in Literature, starting in World War II, as a way to express the existential crisis of humankind. However, even though the WWII was a decisive turning point to understand the disenchantment with heroes, we find signs of an early form of anti-heroism in silent films. For example, from the literary western epic hero comes the good though seemingly bad character. In particular, Allan Dwan's movie, *The Good Band Man* (1916), officially starts this trend. Faced with the relativism of sophists, who prioritize effectiveness over truth, an anti-heroism whose function is to unmask falsehood emerges.

Idealism versus moral relativism will be the framework disappearing in postmodernity, in favour of a gradual cultural nihilism under the guise of relativism. Thus, each culture will define its counter-values and, consequently, the figures who embody them. In addition to the choice of speaking of

21 Eric Bentley, *La vida del drama* (México: Paidós, 1995), 243.

22 Murat Kadiroğlu, "A Genealogy of Antihero", *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil Ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi* 52, no. 2 (2012): 1.

‘heroes’ rather than ‘the hero,’ in postmodernity the old sophistic practice to shape the narrative according to one’s interests, in order to state one’s point, emerges. Schopenhauer learned too late how that tactic and strategic practice of taking an advantage through speech was more widespread than desirable in public discourse. Actually, he merely recovered Aristotle’s lessons on sophistic logic and their *modus operandi*. It was a matter of time and opportunity for the construction of a story to turn into a way to boost or degrade the image and reputation of a historical figure or not. With the emergence of the press, the capacity that storytelling has to influence the social perception of people’s public image has multiplied. This is why we are not scandalized by the fact that the story took the spotlight from facts and the truth. Here the mythical dialogue “Print the Legend!”, by the editor of *The Shinbone Star* in the movie *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962), resonates. The relation between mythification and heroization is natural.

Heroization Processes

Therefore, the dispute—or the war—declared against heroes, leaders, or any kind of cultural leader is also long-standing. It starts with the story. Vico said that heroic fables were true stories of heroes and their heroic customs, which blossomed in every nation during barbarism.²³ Both zeal and worship of heroes, as well as the social distrust in heroism, can be understood in the context of the reinforcement or relaxation of customs, to which speeches and poems contribute. For example, Plato himself indirectly criticizes stories, in Book X from *The Republic*, where he considered the presence of poets in the polis dire. His fear—based on his honest love for wisdom—came from seeing the consequences of the influx of poems and stories on the heads of his fellow citizens. He referred to poems with provoking figures, spoiled gods, examples of uncontrolled and unrestrained passions that altered people’s minds, making them unfit for public life. According to this point of view, myths and politics go hand in hand. In reality, these figures that Plato distrusts are not genuine heroes, but moral versions adopted *ad hoc* and according to current trends. Those popular tales based on the *pathos* are also a distraction from the activity of thinking. Without being able to distinguish

23 Giambattista Vico, *Ciencia nueva*, Volume 1, trans. J. M. Bermudo (Barcelona: Orbis, 1985), 41.

wrong from right, citizens stop following reason, positioning themselves in the plane of opinion and belief. This is why they are easily manipulated, and foolish when it comes to making decisions. The city is also weakened by fostering a subtle rejection of and reluctance to achieving virtue. All because stories have examples of ethical dissolution, i.e., counter-heroes. However, Plato is not always pessimistic. When it comes to tolerating stories, he is condescending toward the most edifying ones or simply those produced by poet-philosophers.²⁴

We also find a clear reference to this iconoclastic tendency in Nietzsche's rebellious spirit²⁵ because, in addition to going against German culture, he presents his personal proposal for role models. He tactically assimilates virtue with reason; and when he gets tired of reason, he also tires of virtue. The post-heroic era is definitely founded on Nietzsche's thoughts, which mark its nihilistic program. However, it is deeply rooted in the awkwardness aroused by the existence of belief and the authority that it comes with, since, initially, it does not only go up against imperative rationalism. Its most problematic manifestation is the attempt to sideline ethics by making it dispensable or incidental in the face of the convenience of public moral or a civilizing impulse.

Heroization and Mythification Processes

As described above, the introduction of the hero (and antihero) is closely linked to the myth. The term μῦθος (*mythos*) means story, something expressed, narrated, woven. However, it is a problematic concept due to a long-standing tradition of interpretations where the common ties are hard to point out and connect. Meletinsky, for example, proposes a revision of the concept from the point of view of epistemology. However, along with valuing the cognitive relation established between myth and receptor, the matter of belief and *mimesis* or *imitatio* appears—how the myth affects our comprehension of the world and shapes behaviour. It is at this point that heroism (and the various forms that this exemplary paradigm takes) controls the foundations of the mythical narrative. This means that the myth, understood as a sacred story in ancient Greek traditions, embodies the life of original founders. The

24 Platón, *La República*, Libro X. (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1991).

25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *El crepúsculo de los ídolos* (Barcelona: Editorial Plutón, 2025).

way to keep this tradition alive is the ritual, as a repetition of the myth—to bring their feats back into the limelight, to remember the heroes. However, even though they are different, both the Platonic view and the Aristotelian view agree with the fact that the myth is a way of narrating with meaning. From this cognitive point of view, the myth is storytelling that metaphorically captures and suggests the marvellous and enigmatic relationship of human beings with the world. When faced with evidence that strict logical thinking is invalid as an explanation for existence and relational human identity, the myth appears again and again. Hence, along with mythology—as a collection of stories—the myth exists, like a guiding force (the soul of the story) of the tale, the fable. Alongside these two methods, the mythicizing/myth-making process would be a mode of discursive elaboration whereby the methods used to generate the same effect as the previous two are reproduced, acquiring an enigmatic-sacred character.

The mythical style can also be fallaciously imitated. For this purpose, rhetorical techniques are used, which consist in pondering the value of arguments with positive emotions, or in the selection of the protagonist, which spontaneously contributes to its validation, formalization, and social acceptance. On the other hand, this persuasive base would have little to do without using the pseudo-syllogisms logic, which acts like the indispensable base for the pseudo-belief for this to be feasible one way or another. Through myth-making or demythifying narratives, events, characters, celebrities, and commemorations acquire a mythical-heroic aura or halo—justified or not—as discourse adopts a tangential stance, seemingly plausible yet not necessarily true. Added to this is the fact that any attempt to demystify or deheroize something is confronted with the belief generated as a result of that operation, so not only does it fail to deheroize the object, but rather remystifies it. From the point of view of the heroic myth, hence comes the difficulty added to the study of narratives. As indicated in another one of this issue's articles, it is necessary to recover (anti)heroic writing as a way to recover the authentic origin—the ultimate extraordinary reason that ties the hero and the myth with the truth. It would result in two advantages. The first one—that may be characterized as gratuitous—is precisely heroic because it could have not existed and yet it insists on doing so. (...) The second one does not accept the conditions characterizing its time, but tries to change it from within, revealing how marvellous what until then was mundane could be.²⁶ For we know that

26 David Pérez Chico, "La importancia de la escritura (anti)heroica".

a heroic soul is one that, as Socrates taught, has persistently cultivated the practice of good, rooted in the source of truth.

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