



## Mustafa Ziyalan Heroes

Why do we need Heroes? And are they real or merely constructs?

### 1

While I'm writing this, two of my heroes sit on top of my computer: Silver Surfer, a gift from my son, and the Little Prince whom I found in Paris at long last.

### 2

I am reading *The Social History of the Machine Gun* by John Ellis (Pantheon Books, New York, 1975). Ellis reports certain reluctance on the part of the ruling elite to accept the machine gun at least until the First World War. While examining the reasons for this he mentions the staunch belief in the concept – if not the cult – of the hero and heroism and the struggle to maintain this belief for any price. Millions of soldiers paid for those efforts, for the delusion that a more heroic infantry onslaught (with bayonets!) would defeat the machine guns with their lives, as seen in *The Paths of Glory* by Stanley Kubrick. Apparently it was very hard for the same elite to give up on the heroic individual and the individual hero; perhaps as hard as them once was for it to listen to Copernicus and Galileo and to give up their perceived – read "delusional" – central position in their anthropocentric universe.

It can not be a mere coincidence then that Christopher Caudwell, in his *studies on a dying culture*, devoted a whole essay to a phenomenon of the very same cult/ure of the individual hero or the heroic individual, namely Lawrence of Arabia. Caudwell says that heroes are not a product of their own qualities but rather of circumstances. This statement, interesting, even revolutionary when first uttered, may sound trite now. Yet, frankly, we do not have a shortage of heroes ourselves, some of them supposedly chosen by, yet some others clearly imposed on us.

Well, we can fastforward to our current heroes from here. For example the rockers of the group Slater Kinney say in their last album "One Beat" which I think is one of the most remarkable musical efforts since 9/11: "And the president hides / while working man rush in / To give their lives..." This may sound like an observation in passing; considered in a different way, however, it may help us to look at the relationship between the hero – here President Bush, who at least immediately after 9/11 appeared to be widely considered as something of a hero –, and the non-hero. Like in any system which is not quite democratic, the president could be seen as an expression or symptom of the

non-presidents' inability to create their own alternatives. On the other hand, he could also be viewed as a way for the non-president to cope with this inability, if I may say, "castration". What is not only said, but actually believed goes like this: Any citizen can become a president, the president is elected by the citizens; but being a president is – in a paradoxical way – an expression of being extraordinary, etc. This may look indeed paradoxical at times, but on the whole suggests mechanisms of coping with the inability to write your own destiny – in reality never being able to elect your own president, never being able to be president, being stuck with the alternatives imposed on you.

I think it may be fair to say that at any given time the number of heroes and the intensity of the tendency to create them are proportional to the failure of us non – heroes – people who create or accept heroes – to cope with their shortcomings in writing their own destinies.

Then, inspired by some Marxist texts, perhaps we could say this, too: Heroes and hero-worship are opium of the masses. And, perhaps paradoxically, they do not exist. They are constructs.

If we'd like to go beyond this, we could listen to Sigmund and Anna Freud, for example, and perhaps start by considering this: Heroes and our tendency to create them may be two of our mechanisms to cope with ourselves, our glitches, shortcomings, failures...

### 3

Then, after all, why Silver Surfer? Why The Little Prince? Is it any significant that these are fictional heroes? What does all this say about me?  
Well, all things I should be discussing with my psychotherapist...

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