

Victims and Heroes

SUSAN NEIMAN

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SUSAN NEIMAN is the director of the Einstein Forum, an international interdisciplinary think tank in Berlin. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Neiman studied philosophy at Harvard under the great twentieth-century philosopher John Rawls and at the Freie Universität in Berlin, before teaching philosophy at Yale and Tel Aviv Universities. She is the author of *Slow Fire: Jewish Notes from Berlin* (1992), *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (1994), *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002), and *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (2008).

What leads a Kantian to think about heroes? Those who find it puzzling may have read no further in Kant's ethics than the *Groundwork*, which focuses on rules for deciding which actions are moral. In teaching morality, however, Kant thinks heroes should stand at the fore. We learn to make moral judgments by examining the characters of men and women who act morally. The test of moral activity, as opposed to self-serving action that happens to coincide with it, is heroism. Learning to make moral judgments by examining heroic exemplars is so natural, and effective, that Kant recommends it even for "businessmen, women, and ten year old children."

But the apparent odd coupling of Kant and the hero reflects something much deeper than textual ignorance. The belief that heroes are romantic, and the Enlightenment is not, is very widespread. Whether they view it as a reason for regret or relief, most people agree that the Enlightenment opened a postheroic age. I believe this is wrong, but I'll begin by acknowledging the force of such claims. In one way or another, people have been mourning the decline of simple heroic virtue, and its replacement by modern calculation and self-interest, since Odysseus outlived Achilles in the Trojan War.

Plato records a dispute about whether Achilles or Odysseus was the better man, so the dispute must be older than he was. Odysseus is everything Achilles is not. Even his most important military achievement, the invention of the Trojan horse, breaks every code of martial honor. It did end the war. But it's a piece of the behavior that led Voltaire to write, "I do not know how it comes to pass, but every reader bears secretly an ill-will to the wise Ulysses." Perhaps Voltaire exaggerated, but a glance at the literature shows that Odysseus bashing has a very long history, going back, at the least, to the fifth-century poet Pindar. Pindar was furious that Homer left the ambiguous Odysseus alive after Troy, while consigning straightforward noble figures like Achilles and Ajax to the shades. Pindar was defending the old order, and he viewed the triumph of Odysseus as moral decay. But you needn't belong to the aristocracy to object to Odysseus: Euripedes portrayed him as vile and deceptive, the Stoics thought he was whiny, and Jonathan Shay would subject him to court-martial for saving his own skin without bringing home any of the enlisted men whose lives were in his charge.

The most thorough attack on Odysseus was made by Adorno and Horkheimer in 1944. Their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was the twentieth century's most influential attack on the Enlightenment, a.k.a. modernity. The book argued that *The Odyssey* was the beginning of the end: the first modern novel showed the first modern man, uprooted, cool, and dispassionate. Premodern heroes were subject to the tyranny of superstition: modern heroes subject themselves to the internalized tyranny of repression. Adorno and Horkheimer's most memorable example left Odysseus as the brutal, denatured industrial baron whose workers have been deafened in order to toil ever harder. The captain who stops his sailors' ears and binds himself to the mast to sail past the Sirens foreshadows the modern capitalist, relentlessly driving himself and his workers through a sterilized world. As compensation, he treats himself to an occasional trip to the opera; the workers must forego even that.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, Odysseus's triumphs are the empty triumphs of modernity itself. In a culture where naming is magic, the hero disowns his own self in denying his name. Doesn't this foreshadow the abstract modern self that is no self at all? (When the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written, Foucault had yet to announce the death of the subject, but to Adorno and Horkheimer in Santa Monica, it already seemed on its last legs.) The story of the Sirens shows the triumph of reason—and shows it to be hollow. Odysseus suppresses his passion in order to reach a long-term goal. Here the modern subject uses reason to dominate nature—his own nature first of all—while leaving a small space for the empty version of nature and passion we've come to call culture. Thus safely framed and bounded, art can no longer move us. Deprived of its vital power, it serves only to let off steam, thus betraying the aesthetic, or aesthetic/erotic, impulse itself.

There is something brilliant about this reading. But the spell lasts only until one asks the question: so you want he should drown?

It's interesting to wonder what Achilles would have done in such a situation, but stooping to put wax in his men's ears and letting them tie him up would not have been an option. I imagine him curling his lip and jumping into the sea, sword in hand—perhaps even taking a Siren down with him. That's how romantic heroes behave. Odysseus, in contrast, refuses any easy way out. Here as elsewhere he dares to be divided, to acknowledge that being human means being torn, that being grown-up entails real choices, and facing regret.

All these truths are so banal that it might seem pointless to assert them—were there not several schools of thought that have flourished by

denying them. Adorno and Horkheimer's use of *The Odyssey* is the model for a form of deconstruction that's become so pervasive and automatic it looks like a tic. They do not, to be sure, go so far as Foucault, for whom the abolition of public execution by torture was just a more sinister form of domination. But they do imply that every form of action is futile, as everything dynamic becomes deadened. Turning music into high culture to be suffered in the straitjacket of a tux and a concert hall is turning its power into mush.

I don't have an alternative to the undermining power of the culture industry, but I know the alternatives are more than two: either you have songs so powerful they drive men mad, or you have—Muzak. And those are the alternatives left to Adorno and Horkheimer and their many heirs. (I should note that their heirs are not apparent in Anglo-American philosophy departments, but are all the more pervasive everywhere else. Freshmen in liberal arts courses are introduced to contemporary philosophy not by reading *A Theory of Justice*—or, alas, even Sartre!—but by reading *Discipline and Punish*.) Adorno and Horkheimer never actually *say* Odysseus shouldn't have survived, but they do imply that his life—like ours—isn't really worth living, at least when compared to the richer lives of yesteryear.

From our distance, Achilles can look like a hotheaded fool, bellowing and slashing his way to the glorious death that—even he acknowledges, too late, in Hades—is so hollow that a bondsman's life would be preferable. But Achilles has had thoughtful modern defenders. Jonathan Shay, in his brilliant *Achilles in Vietnam*, uses his own experience as a psychiatrist working with veterans to tease out an understanding of the traumas created when the courage and honor to which soldiers are trained are unmet by the conditions of war. Once his berserk episodes are understood, Shay thinks we can admire the sheer willingness to risk one's life that always produces a moment of awe. I want to understand that moment.

It is easy to find Hector's courage admirable, but Achilles persists as a lout—a lout whose daring was utterly senseless. Whatever was it for? *The Iliad* does begin with rapine and plunder, but the fact that the Greeks—like other armies—did it doesn't mean that's what drove them to Troy. Like Tolstoy or any other great war poet, Homer leaves you thinking it was all for nought, but that's the sort of hindsight that takes years of slaughter to achieve. If the Trojans were fighting for their homeland, the Greeks were fighting for a principle. The role that guest rights played in ancient Mediterranean cultures suggests what was at stake. Throughout

Homer as well as the Bible, the difference between civilization and barbarism is defined by the way strangers are treated. Civilized folk welcome the stranger with food and drink and shelter, loading him with gifts before asking his name. Barbarians eat them alive (see the Cyclops) or gang-rape them to death (like the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah). The stranger, of course, has reciprocal obligations. When Paris answered the wining and dining at Menelaus's court by absconding with the wife of the host, and a sizable amount of his treasure, he violated the mainstay of international law. If the Greeks were to preserve any measure of order between peoples, they were bound to respond in force.

Did they sing and bluster, pillage and rape, treat the expedition as the sort of adventure that restless young men tend to seek without much clarity over consequences or principles at all? Of course they did, like their heirs at Bull Run or Flanders. I'm not here to declare the unmixed nature of soldiers' motives—just to grasp what it is about soldiering that has made it the paradigm of heroism from Homer's day to ours. "War is the *strong* life; it is life *in extremis*; war taxes are the only ones men never hesitate to pay, as the budgets of all nations show us." William James wrote these lines as an avowed pacifist, and his 1906 essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" may be the most thoughtful reflection on these questions ever written. I'll return to it shortly, but first I want to probe the impulse to give one's life for a cause. Seen under daylight, away from adrenaline, it seems the clearest form of irrationality. A reference to testosterone is only slightly more explanatory than Molière's reference to dormative virtue. What makes men give up the one solid and particular basis of everything else they could desire or hope for—in the name of an untouchable abstraction?

The terrorist attacks of September 11, and the Bush administration's reactions to them, lend the question more than merely cultural significance. None of the initial explanations offered seemed right. Some claimed, "They hate us for our freedoms," while others called them radical losers, capable of producing nothing but a final fifteen minutes of attention by exploding with nihilist rage. Against the hysteria, others tried to argue that jihadism could be answered with good materialist explanations: given jobs, better living conditions, and the prospects of an acceptable future, young men would find a better use for their minds and bodies than blowing them up. All such claims presuppose that terrorism is undertaken by the wretched of the earth as a form of ghastly compensation for the absence of something they were denied.

Such explanations lasted only until empirical studies called the premises into question. In the past few years, social scientists have conducted thousands of interviews with terrorists and the people who knew them to uncover a far more puzzling picture. In a summary by anthropologist Scott Atran, suicide terrorists turn out to be “more educated and economically well off than surrounding populations. They also tend to be well-adjusted in their families, liked by their peers, and—according to interrogators—sincerely compassionate to those they see themselves as helping.” Study after study show that terrorist organizations have their pick of the best and the brightest. Most of the young people to whom they appeal are not the ones looking empty-handed at the treasures contemporary culture has to offer. They have been to the mall, and they want something that cannot be found there.

Initial discussions of suicide terrorists described them as bumpkins who were fooled into blowing themselves up with the assurance that a few moments of pain was a small price to pay for a first-class ticket to paradise. In fact, few jihadists are moved by this sort of calculation. “All leaders of jihadi groups that I have interviewed,” writes Atran, “tell me that if anyone ever came to them seeking martyrdom to gain virgins in paradise, the door would be slammed in his face.” To be sure, the clearer the belief in a world to come, the easier it may be to leave this one behind. Commenting on what one Confederate chaplain called “the military power of religion,” Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering* explores the ways in which finely drawn nineteenth-century conceptions of the afterlife helped Americans sustain the war that consumed a larger proportion of their population than all the other wars combined. But Faust also notes that late-nineteenth-century America was an age that had begun to doubt immortality, partly in the train of the war itself. She quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes, who rejected Christianity while badly wounded on a battlefield, and went on to write,

I do not know the meaning of the universe. But in the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds, I have found one certainty: that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.

Such words are likely to chill us as the height of romantic folly—or what may come to something similar, the drive toward death that Freud came

to view as original in the wake of World War I. Faust's explication of Holmes's speech brings us somewhat further: "The very purposelessness of sacrifice created its purpose. In a world in which 'commerce is the great power' and the 'man of wealth' the great hero, the disinterestedness and selflessness of the soldier represented the highest ideal of a faith that depended on the actions not of G-d but of man." Before we dismiss such tones as fatally high-flown, manipulative rhetoric, we need to examine a crucial text of that resolutely reasonable (and rhetorically challenged) philosopher Immanuel Kant.

II

Like his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* has a transcendental deduction, and most readers begin it with the hope that they're about to get a proof of the moral law, something akin to the demonstration that coherent experience would be impossible without the order provided by the categories. A little reflection should show such a hope to be futile: we may not be able to conceive a world without causality, but experience has been steadily revealing the absence of moral order since the book of Job. But a proof of the moral law is the real philosopher's stone, the sort of thing you'd love to whip out to silence an apologist for torture, or at the very least the tireless speaker who haunts every ethics lecture demanding that you show him why relativism is false. Parallels to Kant's metaphysics lead his readers on, but at just the point in the *Critique of Practical Reason* where they're expecting a proof, he offers an example.

Take a fellow who insists he can't resist temptation anytime he passes a brothel. Were you to threaten him with execution as soon as he left it—installing a gallows on the doorstep to keep his imagination focused—he'd be sure to discover his temptation to be quite resistible. The fear of death trumps every ordinary human desire, since staying alive is a necessary condition on fulfilling any of them. Yet the same man will waver when faced with a choice between instant execution and committing injustice that would doom another innocent. Like most of us, he would likely find ways to quiet his conscience. But the wavering counts. In the first case, we know exactly what we would do: give up brothels or chocolates or any other form of pleasure in order to stay alive, and we know this as we know any other truth of nature. In the second case, we do not. And in the moment of uncertainty about what we *would* do, we know what we *should* do, and thus what we *could* do. That moment is the one in which

we grasp our own freedom. Justice can move us to deeds that overcome the strongest of natural desires, the love of life itself. That reveals a measure of human dignity that nothing else can—and lifts us out of a world in which our lives are determined into one that is, genuinely, transcendent.

The dangers of leaving solid ground here are easy to see. Many of my German colleagues grew up in hallways adorned with photos of fallen relatives in Nazi uniform they were taught to honor as heroes to a lost cause. Even worse: Germans *we* were taught to honor for refusing to live in the Third Reich were attacked by the chancellor himself, well into the sixties, as traitors to their country's honor. Closer to home, I grew up in an American South still in mourning for the Confederacy, and realized only much later that there was something extraordinary about singing "Dixie" in school. Nor did I know that one of my favorite books, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, was meant as a savage attack on southern love for the likes of Sir Walter Scott—a love, Mark Twain felt, that had led to the war. If the yearning for transcendence produced such specters, small wonder we try to keep it at bay.

Though they don't acknowledge it, the Frankfurters' portrait of Odysseus joins neatly with the romantic tradition that excoriated the Enlightenment as calculated and plodding. It's a tradition as present in Confederate scorn for prosy Yankee utilitarians as in the many German voices at the turn of the last century who saw war as the alternative to the mercantile consciousness that would turn life into an endless market. Even as late as 1918, no less a writer than Thomas Mann would contrast the heroism of Germany with the civilization of "security and flabbiness" he saw in the Allies: a "world of ants with insurance policies," a "pacified Esperanto earth" where "air omnibuses bustle over a white-coated, rational, statelessly unified, techno-sovereign, electrically far-sighted 'humanity.'" He actually used the German word for "television"—*elektrisches Fernsehen*—before it was invented.

We've good reason to beware this kind of language. Most of my American friends had trouble naming a single hero, when asked, and European reactions to the question were even worse. Friends and colleagues there told me that the concept of heroism was so tainted with the stench of blood that the very word was better avoided altogether.

If not positively dangerous, heroes are called elitist, since rants against democracy and demands for heroic figures have often gone together. It's claimed they can't grow in democratic soil, which is devoted to producing fruits that are all the same height. But when pushed at all to talk about

heroes, most contemporary thinkers opt for deconstruction. “A psychologist would say that anyone who admires someone loves him in order to avoid being afraid of him. A sociologist would add: admiration is the currency we pay heroes to relieve us.” The quote is from a German philosopher, but the point was recently argued at length in the language of evolutionary psychology at a Harvard conference where I mentioned Wesley Autrey, the fifty-year-old black construction worker who captured the attention of millions of New Yorkers when he dove under an oncoming train to save a young white stranger. I wondered how evolutionary psychology would explain Autrey’s action, much less the fascinated wonder that surrounded it. Steven Pinker was persistent, arguing that my wonder was a function not of my wish to be as brave as Autrey, but of my wish that someone else would act as Autrey did should I happen to fall into a subway.

I suppose deconstruction has its uses. And surely if the distractions of buying and surfing were an *effective* alternative to carnage, one might bite the bullet and welcome Nietzsche’s Last Men. But distractions keep failing. Sooner or later most people tire of calculating and collecting, and strive for the sense that they stand above all that. I’ve brought in Kant to argue that this sense can’t be dismissed as romantic or mystical, still less as a nihilistic wish for destructive abandon. Those who disdain simple survival to risk their own lives are not seeking death as such, but the force that makes life worthwhile. We cannot offer them alternatives unless we acknowledge what’s at stake. Kant says it’s the manifest experience of freedom, and with it the moral law.

Don’t rush back to utilitarianism before hearing me out. Or—because it’s good to have company when one is this far out on a limb—listen instead to William James, who urged, “Pacifists ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents.” Militarism, he continued, “is the great preserver of our ideas of hardihood, and human life with no use for hardihood would be contemptible. Without risks or prizes for the darer, history would be insipid indeed.” Devoutly believing “in the reign of peace and the gradual advent of some sort of socialistic equilibrium,” he did not “believe that peace either ought to be or will be permanent on this globe, unless the states, pacifically organized, preserve some of the old elements of army discipline. A permanently successful peace-economy cannot be a pleasure-economy.”

It would be tempting to ascribe James’s words to a naïveté that the First World War would make impossible a few years later had he not begun “The Moral Equivalent of War” with a reference to the Civil War, whose devastation was still near enough to be felt by everyone of his generation.

Ask all our millions, north and south, whether they would vote now (were such a thing possible) to have our war for the Union expunged from history, and the record of a peaceful transition to the present time substituted for that of its marches and battles, and [few] would say yes. Those ancestors, those efforts, those memories and legends, are the most ideal part of what we now own together, a sacred spiritual possession worth more than all the blood poured out. Yet ask those same people whether they would be willing, in cold blood, to start another civil war now to gain another similar possession, and not one man or woman would vote for the proposition.

James calls it a modern paradox: unshaking reverence for the memories and legends of those who fought the war coexists with absolute revulsion for the carnage it left behind. For James, the paradox was not an abstract one; two of his brothers fought in the Union army. The shock and horror toward the very idea of war-making that later wars produced stood on a continuum with that felt toward the Civil War, as the machine gun stood on a continuum with the Henry repeating rifle. When James speaks of martial virtues, he is aware of their price. And still he insists they are preferable to the alternative: a “sheep’s paradise,” a “cattleyard of a planet,” a “mass of human blubber,” “insipid, mawkish, dishwatery.” I’ve quoted him at length not only because he was close enough to war to resist its most sentimental representations, but also because he was very clear that the paradox shouldn’t be resolved by force, in any sense of the word. Though he praised a life of “strenuous honor” and scorned those visions of utopia fit for sheep and cattle, he left no room for the conclusions other nineteenth-century thinkers would draw. If his tone can be reminiscent of Carlyle or Nietzsche, his books, unlike theirs, could not be found in Hitler’s bunker. (It’s undeniable that Nietzsche’s work was literally purged and warped to fall in line with Nazi ideology, but it’s equally undeniable that, along with works of genius, Nietzsche provided a great deal of fodder that was there for the warping.) James’s condemnation of *The Iliad* is clear and explicit. Yet James’s essay, backed by Kant’s metaphysics, can still be read as the best modern attempt to capture Achilles’ appeal.

It’s the appeal of the moment of absolute freedom that Kant marked in the willingness to risk your life that does test your convictions as nothing else can. Rousseau thought Socrates would be remembered as any old Sophist had he only died of natural causes. In examining the behavior of ordinary citizens in postwar Germany, Hannah Arendt underlined the

difficulties of deciding who had behaved heroically—not only because nothing in an individual’s past could be used to predict it, but also because as soon as the war was over, almost everyone claimed to have been quietly opposed to the Nazis all along. They called themselves “inner emigrants.” Of course they’d joined the Nazi Party. What better way to hide their inner emigration? Arendt concluded wryly that the only sure way to tell a real opponent from an opportunist was whether the Nazis had executed her, an awful confirmation of the Allied view that the only good German was a dead one.

Now Arendt rejected that view as I do, along with the suggestion that dying for a principle is the only way to show your willingness to live for it. But I hope to have shown why it can seem neither crazy nor thoughtless, and why the urge to valorize Achilles continues to appeal.

The Frankfurt School’s portrait of Odysseus is continuous with the romantic mourning for heroic virtue, but I don’t want to deny the differences. One is a consequence of technology; the mechanics of modern warfare leave little room for the deeds of individual warriors to *matter* enough to be remembered in song. (It’s chilling to consider that an effective suicide bombing does require the kind of individual skill and daring that’s absent in many modern army maneuvers.) Achilles has been losing his luster since Gettysburg, and attempts to bring it back after Hiroshima are rearguard actions. In deconstructing Odysseus, Adorno and Horkheimer had no intention of resurrecting his opposite number. Resolutely postmodern, the metaphysics of suspicion applies not only to Odysseus, but to anyone who might be tempted to step in his place. The attack on Odysseus is an attack not on a particular sort of hero, but on the possibility of heroism at all.

It’s a good theoretical underpinning for a contemporary culture that has become not just unwilling but embarrassed to talk about heroes. I will return to that embarrassment in closing, but I mention it here to highlight another. Some disputes have been with us for millennia: whether we’ll be stuck with a life of soulless dishonor without heroes or a life of sinister manipulation with them. But however they stood on these questions, there is one stance *anyone* would have been embarrassed to take a few decades ago: the stance of the helpless victim.

III

In 2009 Benjamin Netanyahu paid his first state visit to Berlin, and to mark the occasion Germany’s largest newspaper publisher arranged a

special gift. In a carefully orchestrated ceremony whose guests included sixty diplomats, several ministers, and a handful of Berlin's Holocaust survivors, the chief editor offered Netanyahu the original architect's ground plans for the concentration camp Auschwitz. There were twenty-nine drawings in all, carefully explained by one Ralf Georg Reuth, journalist and author of a book on Goebbels. He reported, "I showed him where the 144 barracks were for the men. . . . Here was the ramp, and there were the train tracks. The crematoria and the gas chambers are not drawn in this plan, only a giant morgue. But I showed the prime minister the large photo on the wall which was taken by American pilots. There they are easy to see." Netanyahu gave a speech expressing his gratitude and brought the plans with him to his next stop at the office of Chancellor Merkel, who declared herself to be "very moved." The drawings were designated by the publisher as a gift "to the Jewish people as a sign of respect."

Netanyahu had the decency to experience a moment he described as "almost speechless" before taking the plans to the United Nations to wave at Iran. Perhaps, as he claimed, this is the historical proof that the libraries full of documents and testimonies have been waiting for in order to finally convince Ahmadinejad that the Holocaust occurred. What leaves *me* nearly speechless is not the political use of the ground plans—almost anything, from mass murder to puppies, can be put to political use—but the fact that such a use is conceivable. What does it mean to give the ground plans of Auschwitz to the Jewish people as a sign of respect?

Fifty years ago it would have been a slap in the face. But although the Holocaust has become the paradigm of the contemporary tendency to turn our view from the heroes of history to its victims, it didn't begin in Israel. On the contrary, as Tom Segev's superbly disturbing book *The Seventh Million* shows, until the early sixties every reference to the Holocaust was an occasion for shame. Israel had been founded to provide an alternative to the image of the Jew as defenseless victim, and the early state was so committed to rejecting that image that it often neglected to care for the victims themselves. High school students in Israel today are urged to take the laconically named "Roots Trip" the state sponsors to send them to Auschwitz, but in the state's first few decades, the Holocaust was barely on the lesson plan. Israel needed the refugees who staggered out of the concentration camps, but it had trouble embracing them, for they were a threat to the ideals that had driven Zionism from the start. The nominal goal was normalization: to have the opportunities for political self-determination other nations take for granted, to be a land and a people

like any other. But what drove pioneers to fight bandits and malaria, drain swamps, and plant trees was not a vision of normalcy—as the joke went, Jewish policemen and prostitutes—but a vision of Jewish heroism. The Jew should no longer be the passive object but the active subject of history.

Netanyahu's ceremonial acceptance of the ground plans is thus a direct reversal of the heart of that Zionism he claims to defend—like so much of his government's other behavior, which is another subject entirely. It is, however, entirely in tune with the dominant melody of most postwar culture on an international scale. Jewish focus on the Holocaust, both in Israel and elsewhere, began relatively late; it's hard to find before the 1970s. But it became the *non plus ultra* of identity in the age of identity politics, with increasing competition among peoples to prove they were just as miserable victims as anyone else. A book on the Nanking Massacre was subtitled "The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II," and its Chinese American author gave interviews expressing the wish that her Holocaust would "find its Spielberg." Often the contest comes close to hysteria in eastern and central Europe, where nations who suffered under Stalinism are demanding equal treatment for their wounds. Current political debates in Europe about whether communist and fascist oppression were similar are driven by many agendas. Their form, however, always depends on the claim that my pain is worse than yours.

I once attended a conference where the Ukrainian foreign minister declared, "We Ukrainians understand the Jews very well, because of our own suffering in the last century. In just one of the unnecessary famines of the 1930s, the Ukraine lost seven million of its citizens." Seven million to six million, and that in one year! Was he suggesting we ought to throw in the towel, in the face of the score, and recognize that the Ukraine had won?

Won what? The struggle for recognition that Hegel saw as captured by the attempt to overcome your enemy—first through battle, later through production—has been replaced. Recognition is no longer provided by *doing* more than another, but by *enduring* more than another. It's a reversal that's fatal for any concept of political morality, for it assumes that what counts is not what you do in the world, but what the world does to you.

Note how different this is from the Hegelian-inspired Marxist view expressed in the old workers' song "Solidarity Forever." Questions concerning the relative contributions of capital and labor are not ones I can address here, but I don't want them to distract from the philosophical

point. This song goes on for many verses, but its emphasis is on the idea that “without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn,” *not* the idea that “they have taken untold millions which they never toiled to earn.” Perhaps the New Left’s attack on the work ethic played a role in putting the fact of being outcast and starving, rather than making wonders, in the political forefront.

But initially, the impulse to turn from heroes to victims was a progressive one. History had been the story of the victors, which condemned the victims to double death: once in the flesh, once again in memory. To insist that the victims’ stories enter the narrative was just a part of righting old wrongs. If victims’ stories have claims on our attention, they have claims on our sympathies and our systems of justice. When slaves began to write their memoirs, they took steps toward subjectivity and won recognition—and slowly but certainly recognition’s rewards.

So the movement to recognize the victims of slavery and slaughter and colonialism was made with the best of intentions. It was part of a process of acknowledging that might and right often fail to coincide, that very bad things happen to all kinds of people, and that even when we cannot change that, we are bound to record it. Victimhood should be a source of legitimation for claims to restitution, however complicated it may be to decide whose claims end where. (Europeans are dumbfounded to learn that Americans lose health insurance when they are victims of illness.) Yet in reevaluating the place of the victim in history, something profoundly unhealthy took place. Once we begin to view victimhood *per se* as the currency of recognition, we are on the road to divorcing recognition, and legitimacy, from virtue altogether.

Nietzsche was the first to notice the development, which he located in Christianity: in an act of insidious revenge, he argued, Christians turned aristocratic values of strength into vices, and elevated the meek who could not have beaten their masters in a fair-handed fight. (Note, however, that it took some time before the image of the man of sorrows replaced the image of Christ triumphant.) But the Christian reference has its limits. Jesus was not a victim but a martyr who chose his own fate, and early Christian saints showed breathtaking bravery in rushing to imitate him. Nobody volunteered for a place on the Middle Passage or the train to Treblinka, which is why the barbed-wire halo that has come to surround the concentration camps is completely misplaced.

This makes the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski, the Swiss writer who found fame and fortune with an autobiographical account of his

childhood in a concentration camp, particularly astonishing. The childhood turned out to be invented, and Wilkomirski's fortunes were brief, but not brief enough to prevent a series of imitators. Earlier rogues tried to hide origins that were painful or troubled and invented genealogies that turned them into sons of wandering knights or bishops. Where painful origins were acknowledged, as in Frederick Douglass's narrative, the pain was a prelude to the overcoming of it. The *overcoming* of victimhood was a source of pride; victimhood itself was a matter of shame. The rash of contemporary authors clamoring for attention by inventing worse histories than they actually experienced is a tribute to our vulnerability to the glamour of misery, in sociologist Eva Illouz's apt phrase.

If competitive victimhood provides neither models nor inspiration for active virtue, does it provide something else? Narratives of suffering can produce compassion, a first step on the road to seeking justice. The victim's story reveals her to have the same sort of soul as the victor, and in doing so often creates the visceral sorts of reactions that are needed to turn the bare knowledge of injustice into the will to oppose it. Harriet Beecher Stowe's depiction of Eliza's terror and Uncle Tom's generosity made the evil of slavery alive for readers around the world, and increased the ranks of the abolitionists faster than any previous arguments. (Those who think the need for this sort of sentimentality is outdated should know that, while German cultural and intellectual life since 1947 has been preoccupied with the Holocaust—even spawning a new word, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—the most effective media event was the television broadcast of the Hollywood soap opera *Holocaust*. Viewers said it made them realize that the six million murdered Jews were just people, too.) Individual histories of victims do sharpen our sympathy, and their value cannot be denied, but it should not be overestimated. “Nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery. Witness the case of Cinque, of everlasting memory, on board the *Amistad*. The trial for life of one bold and to some extent successful man, for defending his rights in good earnest, would arouse more sympathy throughout the nation than the accumulated wrongs and sufferings of more than three million of our submissive colored population. We need not mention the Greeks struggling against the oppressive Turks, the Poles against Russia, to prove this.” These words were spoken in 1851 by John Brown to the League of Gileadites, founded to organize armed resistance in response to the Fugitive Slave Law. I turned to Brown in an attempt to answer the question that's shadowed every discussion of terrorism—and thus more obliquely

heroism—in the past decade: isn't one man's terrorist another man's freedom fighter? The question is usually raised to stop discussion, with the implication that everyone's views on the matter are authentic, and therefore equally valid.

The question seems to me the place to begin discussion, not to end it, so my thoughts will not be conclusive. Every major contemporary discussion of John Brown begins by calling him one of the most controversial figures in American history. In Bruce Catton's standard history, he isn't even controversial, but a "freelance fanatic" with a "crack-brained conspiracy" who is comparable to John Wilkes Booth. Ken Burns's classic documentary introduces him by calling Brown "an inept businessman who had failed in six states—yet he believed himself God's agent to destroy slavery." Along with a good deal of debt, Brown had blood on his hands—not only that of the twenty-three men, including two of his sons, who perished as a result of Harper's Ferry, but that of the five murdered under his orders in Pottawatomie, Kansas, several years before. In a recent review of several new books on the subject, James MacPherson expresses the prevailing tone: "Was Brown a terrorist who killed innocent victims or a hero-martyr who struck a mighty blow against the accursed institution of slavery? His body has lain a-moldering in its grave for almost 150 years, and yet there is today no more consensus on the answers to these questions than in 1859."

The refusal to pronounce judgment may be part of normal academic fence-sitting, but it's not an avenue open to philosophy. My reflections here are partly an attempt to question the unwritten noninterference pact that exists between philosophers and historians—leading historians to eschew moral judgment and philosophers to refrain from discussing historical questions. But I also believe that Brown's story itself raises a moral demand.

Americans are his heirs in many ways, and not even white Americans were always disinclined to judgment when it came to John Brown. In 1910 Teddy Roosevelt chose the dedication of a John Brown Memorial Park in Osawatomie, Kansas, to make a major speech announcing the program of what would become his Progressive Party. "We come here today," began Roosevelt, "to commemorate one of the epoch-making events of the long struggle for the rights of man." In arguing for child labor laws, minimum wages for women, graduated income and inheritance taxes, and firmer corporate regulation, Roosevelt sided with Brown on the side of "human welfare vs. property rights." "Our government," he continued, "National

and state, must be freed from the sinister influence of special interests. Exactly as the special interests of cotton and slavery threatened our integrity before the Civil War, so now the great special business interests too often control and corrupt the men and methods of government for their own profit. . . . The Constitution guarantees protection to property, and it must make that promise good. But it does not give the right of suffrage to any corporation.”

Back east, the speech got Roosevelt reviled as a “communist agitator.” His Progressive Party did win more votes than any third party in American history, but was trounced by Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt’s speech is notable, among other things, for the absence of qualifiers like “self-righteous,” “fanatical,” and “monomaniacal” that fill many contemporary discussions of Brown.

IV

Stephen Vincent Benet’s *John Brown’s Body* has been called the American *Iliad*, and if anything deserves such a stature, it’s this epic poem. Title notwithstanding, only 22 of his 357 pages are devoted to Brown himself; the epic is a history of the scope of the war, all set in motion by John Brown at Harper’s Ferry, if any man ever sets anything in motion. Historians then as now share the poet’s conclusion. Many causes made the war seem increasingly unavoidable, but Brown was the spark—or meteor, according to Herman Melville—that radicalized North and South, convincing both sides of the truth of the last words he wrote on the way to the gallows: “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away; but with Blood.”

When Brown wrote that the focus on a hero like Cinque would be more useful in ending slavery than three million stories of suffering, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was still in press. A year later it became America’s first best seller and was widely read abroad. Stowe performed a masterpiece of consciousness raising, but her book was not the first description of the horror of life as a slave. “You get the feeling that the newspapers themselves could explode and lightning will burn and everybody will perish,” wrote Bob Dylan of his visits, in the early 1960s, to the New York Public Library to read newspapers from the period. Abolitionists held meetings, raised money, and established the Underground Railroad. But like most of us, most of what they did was talk. The talk was anything but cheap: even in the North, preachers lost their pulpits for open abolitionist preaching, and one white man was lynched in Illinois for printing an abolitionist

paper. But while they might rouse the right passions, they did not temper the wrong ones, and the situation grew increasingly dire.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, abolitionists had been few in number; most Northerners were content to view slavery with chaste disdain, and sometimes open approval, as long as it took place at a distance. What roused the North were three decisions that meant the slave question could no longer be avoided by staying north of the Mason-Dixon line. The first was the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850 that allowed slave catchers to kidnap those slaves who succeeded in escaping to the North, as well as any unlucky African American freedmen they were able to round up. The year 1857 brought the Supreme Court decision over Dred Scott, which asserted that blacks couldn't be citizens or have any civil rights. The most important, however, was probably the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which nullified earlier legislation restricting slavery to the South and declared slavery a matter of popular sovereignty to be decided by vote of the majority of inhabitants of each territory. The most immediate consequence of the act was a flood of immigration to Kansas. Slaveholders from Missouri moved over the border in the hope of creating a majority, while abolitionists volunteered to stake out claims there in order to defeat the extension of slavery. Among the latter were five sons of John Brown.

Brown himself was born in 1800 in Connecticut, son of a small farmer and the grandson of a captain in the Continental army, all devout Calvinists. Like his father, Brown seemed to have been an abolitionist from the start, though his passion for the cause kindled at the age of twelve when he experienced the mistreatment of a slave boy in the house where he was lodged. Most unusually for the era, Brown's father raised him to believe in the equality of all people under God, and the lesson was passed on to Brown's own children. As Frederick Douglass and others later noted, Brown's family was the only white one where blacks were invited to share supper as a matter of course. The suppers were not luxurious; Brown struggled to support what would eventually be twenty children. He tried his hand as a tanner, shepherd, small farmer, and surveyor, going bankrupt twice in the effort to put the family on a solid-enough footing to pursue his real calling. At a memorial service for Elijah Lovejoy, the Presbyterian minister murdered by a mob after his newspaper denounced the lynching of a black man in Missouri, Brown rose and addressed the assembly: "Here, before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery." Brown returned home and asked his wife and older sons to kneel and make the same vow.

The family was active in harboring and transporting fugitive slaves to Canada, as well as supporting a small farming settlement of free blacks on the home they carved out of the wilderness of western New York. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act offered an opportunity for action with wider consequences. Brown urged his sons to answer the call for Free State volunteers to homestead in Kansas, and five of them set out in 1854. The journey was awful. The two brothers who traveled by steamboat described the other passengers as permanently drunk and brandishing Bowie knives. When Jason Brown's four-year-old son died of a cholera outbreak, the family disembarked to bury him in a thunderstorm—only to find that the proslavery ship's captain had pulled off before they could reboard. They continued by stagecoach, but hearing their northern accents, local Missouri farmers refused to sell them food. Weeks later they reached the camp the other brothers had struck in Kansas.

It was called "Bleeding Kansas," but it was already a civil war. The forces were differently unequal. While the Free Staters were in the majority, they were struggling to survive on the rough Kansas plain, under constant harassment from proslavery farmers who would ride out from their homes in Missouri, ransack and burn the settlers' towns, steal their livestock, and occasionally shoot them dead. The object was to terrify the Free Staters into returning home before the popular referendum on slavery; both North and South viewed Kansas as decisive ground. John Brown left for Kansas a year after his sons, expecting to bring provisions and weapons to strengthen the Free Staters' hands. What he found on arriving were a couple of tents and a campfire, his children sick with malaria, their crops spoiled by storm and their animals untended. After burying the body of Jason's son, which he had stopped in Missouri to exhume, Brown built his family two log cabins and made provisions for the winter.

Context is crucial for understanding the Pottawatomie massacre Brown commanded in 1856, the main source of his reputation as a terrorist. Terrorism involves the use of violence outside the law, including what laws exist to govern war. Now Brown held slavery to be an undeclared war by one part of the population against the other, and believed that violent resistance to it was a matter of calling the slaveholders to reckoning. But whether they agree with that or not, historians agree that the vast majority of violence in Kansas—75 percent, by recent accounting—was committed by proslavery forces. They were often in collusion with the fraudulent government installed by President Franklin Pierce. Nor was the Kansas-Nebraska Territory the only part of the Union notable for the absence of law. After

making a speech called “The Crime against Kansas,” the abolitionist senator from Massachusetts Charles Sumner was nearly beaten to death with a gold-headed cane by South Carolina senator Preston Brooks on the floor of Congress. Following the bloody beating, many senators took to carrying weapons in Congress; Brooks’s constituents sent boxes of canes to demonstrate their support. One was inscribed “*Use knock-down arguments.*”

The news of Sumner’s beating was Brown’s last straw. “I am eternally tired of hearing the word *caution*,” he exclaimed. “It is nothing but the word of cowardice.” The next night he commanded a vigilante party of seven men, including four of his sons, who used broadswords to kill five neighbors who had been active in proslavery circles. In his book *John Brown, Abolitionist*, historian David Reynolds argues, “There was appropriateness in Brown’s using terror to avenge the sack of Lawrence and the caning of Sumner, typically Southern acts of violence met by characteristic Northern timidity. Sumner’s helpless passivity before Brooks’ sadistic attack was not unlike the inability of the Lawrence citizens to resist the invading border ruffians.”

Brown’s role in the Pottawatomie massacre came to light, and discussion, much later. Partly aided by local Native Americans with whom the Browns were friendly, the vigilantes avoided capture, so that Brown’s initial fame in Kansas was made in the much less bloody battle at Osawatimie. There Brown let off most of the proslavery soldiers he captured with a lecture explaining that their cause was at odds with the Declaration of Independence. His small force did not prevent the Missouri regiments from sacking the town, but he was considered to have won such a moral victory that Senator John J. Ingalls later recalled, “It was our Thermopylae and John Brown was our Leonidas with his Spartan band.”

More popularly, he was thereafter known as “Old Osawatimie Brown,” and it was under that name that he was captured at Harper’s Ferry. Though debate remains about just what Brown intended, it was certainly not what happened. He had studied the slave insurrection in Haiti as well as the life of the Maroons in Jamaica and seemed to have hoped that by capturing the federal armory at Harper’s Ferry, he could ignite a slave rebellion that would create a provisional state in the Alleghenies, gaining strength by raiding plantations and freeing slaves until the system finally fell. The raid was probably doomed from the start. What Brown lacked most were men. Frederick Douglass refused outright Brown’s plea to join them, as did others; in the end, the band contained six black and thirteen white volunteers, including three of Brown’s sons.

They were initially successful in capturing the armory and a number of hostages, including Colonel Lewis Washington, a small but wealthy planter who was the great-grandnephew of the first US president. Brown wanted his name as well as his weapons, a sumptuous sword given to George Washington by Frederick the Great “for the moral effect it would give our cause.” Brown relished the symbolic justice: George Washington founded a nation that fought for liberties it denied to black men; now black men were guarding his descendant with iron pikes. The hope was to hold the hostages long enough for Brown’s party to take the munitions and return to the mountains, strengthened by the scores of slaves they expected would rally to the cause. But the slaves didn’t rally, and the retreat was delayed—at one point by Brown’s decision to organize a large breakfast from the local hotel for the hostages, a breakfast that Colonel Washington, among others, didn’t eat. The hostages later testified that they were treated with extensive courtesy. By the second day, the news of the raid had raised not just local militia, but federal troops under the command of Robert E. Lee. The battle was brutal but its outcome never in doubt. With Washington’s sword in his hand, one son dead and another dying by his side, John Brown was captured when federal troops bashed in the armory door. A belt buckle seems to have prevented Brown’s own wounds from being fatal.

John Brown would have called it Providence. Although he’d planned for the raid’s success, he was astute enough to know that its failure might be more effective. The military battle over Harper’s Ferry lasted barely two days; the moral battle took up the two months between Brown’s capture and his execution, and the latter was as spectacular a success as the former was a defeat. Initially, the outcome of the moral battle was far from certain. Prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison originally called the raid “a misguided, wild, and apparently insane, though disinterested and well-intended effort.” All but one of Brown’s “Secret Six” supporters rushed to distance themselves from him, literally. With good reason to fear being tried as accomplices, four fled the country, while one took refuge in an insane asylum.

Then came the moment when those of us who were trained in philosophy can be proud of our profession. When even abolitionists who knew Brown well were prepared to spurn him, Thoreau and Emerson took up his cause with an intensity that surprised those who knew them. Emerson’s wife and Thoreau’s mother had been far more engaged in the abolitionist cause than either of the writers, one of whom was known as the revered

but scholastic “Plato of America” and the other as the brilliant but peculiar “hermit of Concord.” They shared a patrician suspicion of anything that looked like a political movement. Yet as abolitionist Wendell Phillips later wrote, “The crowning honor of Emerson is that after talking about heroism for so many years, when the hero, John Brown, came he knew him.”

Thoreau was the first to take an unambivalent stand. “For my own part,” he wrote later, “I commonly attend more to nature than to man, but any affecting human event may blind our eyes to natural objects. I was so absorbed in him as to be surprised whenever I detected the routine of the natural world surviving still, or met persons going about their affairs indifferent.” Two weeks after the raid, he gave an impassioned speech in which he called Brown a man of “rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles.” For Thoreau, Brown had practiced the highest form of civil disobedience. In a comparison crafted to engage his audience at Concord, he called Brown more important than the heroes of Lexington and Concord: “They could bravely face their country’s foes, but he had the courage to face his country itself, when she was in the wrong.”

The speech was repeated several times, and the best lines were widely reported in the news. Brown’s own behavior at his highly public trial reinforced Thoreau’s picture. Carried into court on a stretcher, the wounded Brown spoke with calm and force that impressed even his Southern opponents and declared himself prepared to die for the principles that were as enshrined in the Bible as in the Declaration of Independence.

Thoreau’s defense and Brown’s demeanor were decisive for Emerson, who was the most influential intellectual, and highly paid speaker, in America. Even more important, his Concord poem recalling “the shot heard round the world” left his patriotic credentials unimpeachable, associating him forever with the best ideals of the American Revolution. Five days after Brown’s speech to the court in Virginia, Emerson made a speech in Boston. It began by arguing that John Brown had disproved one deep Southern myth: “The Southerners reckon the New Englanders to be less brave than they.” The prospect of his execution, Emerson continued, was “the *reductio ad absurdum* of slavery, when the Governor of Virginia is forced to hang a man whom he declares to be a man of the most integrity, truthfulness and courage he has ever met.” In the phrase that was picked up across the nation, Emerson said that hanging Brown “would make the gallows glorious as the cross.” That speech was called “Courage.” His second speech on Brown, delivered ten days later, was called “Morals.”

Emerson turned the tide, and by the time Brown was executed a few weeks later, the bulk of Northern public opinion regarded him as “The Hero of 1859,” in the words of a banner gracing a memorial service in Cleveland. Fourteen hundred mourners attended, and numbers were similar across the North. His coffin was carried to the New York family farm in a ceremony that lasted days. On the day of the execution, church bells tolled in much of New England; black businesses closed their doors. Of the thousands of offers of support sent to his family, the most moving was probably one written “by your colored sisters” to his wife just before the execution and published in the *Weekly Anglo-African*:

Tell your dear husband, then, that henceforth you shall be our own! We are a poor and despised people—almost forbidden, by the oppressive restrictions of the Free States, to rise to the higher walks of lucrative employments, toiling early and late for our daily bread; but we hope—and we intend, by God’s help—to organize in every Free State and in every colored church, a band of sisters, to collect our weekly pence, and pour it lovingly into your lap. God will help us, for he is the Judge of the widow and the Father of the fatherless.

When asked if he wanted a clergyman to accompany him to the gallows, Brown refused—he didn’t believe that any clergyman who accepted slavery, and that’s what was available in Virginia, could be a real Christian. He said he’d prefer to be accompanied by barefoot slave children and their mother. Security was so heavy they wouldn’t have gotten near the jailhouse, but several paintings and stories read his wish, as it were, into the record.

I began to read about Brown because I thought he was a case of moral complexity, worth studying in the effort to know whether it was possible to give a reasoned answer to the question: terrorist or hero? As the tenor of my remarks will have made apparent, the more I learned about Brown, the less difficult I found the case. Thoreau and Emerson and those who followed had answered most questions. It was a near-perfect marriage of theory and practice. (As Wendell Phillips remarked after the reprinting of Brown’s own court speech, “Why, men say he should remember that lead is wasted in bullets, and is much better made into types. Well, he fired one gun, and he has made use of the *New York Herald* and *Tribune* for a fortnight.”) Even in Massachusetts, words like Thoreau’s and Emerson’s were not spoken lightly; both men received death threats, and would doubtless

have received more were it known that they not only gave speeches and raised money for Brown's family, but also broke the law by helping one of his coconspirators escape. So without the work of a couple of neo-Kantians in Concord, John Brown's soul would have been stopped in its tracks. But likewise the defense of John Brown was Transcendentalism's finest hour; without it, their praise of self-reliance and civil disobedience can take on the air of the fine disdain for the masses that Harvard education, and residence in the most beautiful town in New England, permits. Joseph Campbell argues that heroes would be nowhere without poets; Carlyle thought that poets are lost without heroes. John Brown's defenders were not only poets, though they were not the sort of philosophers who think you can give necessary and sufficient conditions for much of anything important. Their writings, however, offer reasons, and I want to turn to three arguments that can be mined from those writings to answer the question: was Brown a hero? In sum, they are three: he was effective, he was committed, and he was of good character.

Being effective, of course, was not entirely in his hands. In his 1909 biography *John Brown*, W. E. B. DuBois wrote that Brown "did more to shake the foundations of slavery than any single thing that ever happened in America." On the eve of Brown's execution, the *Springfield (Mass.) Republican* wrote, "No event could so deepen the moral hostility of the people of the free states to slavery as this execution. This is not because the acts of Brown are generally approved, for they are not. It is because the nature and spirit of this man are seen to be great and noble." Here the paper unknowingly echoed Brown's own remarks a decade earlier that one Cinque was more effective than three million Uncle Toms. Because "Uncle Tom" has become an unqualified term of abuse, it should be recalled that Stowe was less concerned with portraying the inhuman patience for which he became legend than the Christian virtues of kindness, generosity, and principle of which slaveholders thought blacks incapable. But blacks were seen to be not only crude and immoral, but craven and cowardly, an image that endured in Northern debates over allowing free blacks to enroll in the Union army. The six black men who died in the raid at Harper's Ferry revealed a dignity that belied Southern stereotypes of degraded subhumans, as the white men belied the Southern image of Yankees as timid traders.

The courage that impressed the North terrified the South, which began to form the militias that would be the base of the Confederate army. Southern newspapers printed cartoons of Brown dressed as Satan

and asserted, “Now that the black radical Republicans have power I suppose they will Brown us all.” Lincoln’s care to denounce him during the 1860 election was a matter of conviction as well as tactics. But it was Lincoln who would come to put Brown’s last words into action, and even to amplify them in his second Inaugural Address: “If God wills that [the war] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’” Had Brown’s actions, or the war itself, had a different outcome, they would have been differently judged. Benet’s answer to his own question—how to weigh John Brown?—was, “Sometimes there comes a crack in Time itself,” which is part of what Bernard Williams called moral luck.

If the first reason for judging Brown a hero is the fact that his raid indeed turned out to be the beginning of the end of slavery, the other two factors were entirely in his hands. One was the manner of his death. Brown’s clarity and composure made him the paradigmatic Kantian hero—one calmly prepared to die in the cause of justice. Unlike Kant’s own paradigm, Thomas More, Brown was willing to kill as well as die for abolition, but heroes can’t always be saints—and vice versa. As a resolute Calvinist, Brown believed in an afterlife, but so did most of his compatriots who watched his sacrifice with awe. Where it didn’t produce awe, Brown’s willingness to die was the main source of the allegations of lunacy. The shaky charges of “hereditary insanity” offered in the courtroom to explain his action, and possibly commute his sentence, were refuted by all the available evidence. What seemed to have fueled the charges was the conviction that such action makes no sense. Thoreau attacked the assumption behind it in his first speech on Brown: “‘But he won’t gain anything by it!’ Well, no, I don’t suppose he could get four-and-sixpence a day for being hung, taken the year round, but then he stands a chance to save a considerable part of his soul—and such a soul!—which you do not. No doubt you can get more in your market for a quart of milk than a quart of blood, but that is not the market that heroes carry their blood to.” Significantly, Nat Turner, who led a far wilder and bloodier revolt in 1837, was never accused of insanity, since it was taken for granted that “every slave hated his bondage.” As one historian commented, the assumption that Brown was a lunatic began to recede during the civil rights movement after freedom riders showed that other white people were willing

to die for a liberation that had no particular relation to their own self-interest. Emerson's speech "Courage" rued a world "turned upside down. I wish we might have health enough to know virtue when we see it, and not cry with the fools *Madman!!* when a hero passes."

Brown's readiness to lay down his life was exemplary, but so was the way that he lived it, and those who judged him a hero were careful in describing it. He failed in several business ventures and disliked working in groups where he didn't have the last word, but these are hardly flaws confined to men at arms. After a lecture Brown gave in Concord, Bronson Alcott wrote, "He tells his story with surprising simplicity and sense, impressing us all deeply by his courage and religious earnestness. Our best people listen to his words—Emerson, Thoreau, Judge Hoar, my wife—and some of them contribute in aid of his plans without asking particulars, such confidence does he inspire with his integrity and abilities." Unitarian preacher Thomas Higginson described him in part:

I saw before me a man whose mere appearance and bearing refuted in advance some of the strange perversions which have found their way into many books, and which have wholly missed the type to which he belonged. In his thin, worn, resolute face there were signs of a fire which might wear him out, and practically did so, but nothing of pettiness or baseness; and his talk was calm, persuasive, and coherent. I never could find in him a trace of mere ambition; he lived, as he finally died, absolutely absorbed in one idea.

This is only part of one of hundreds of texts devoted to analyzing Brown's character, which revealed something like consensus: despite later caricatures of Brown as Satan, every Southerner who actually had direct contact with him was impressed by his integrity. Governor Wise of Virginia who ordered his trial, the jailer who oversaw him, Stonewall Jackson—who happened to be present at the execution—all saw him as exemplifying the honor, daring, and humaneness that were a Southern gentleman's pride. All stressed that he lived in private what he preached in public; he was Puritan all the way through. Here is Douglass's report after their first meeting:

He observed that I might have noticed the simple manner in which he lived, adding that he had adopted this method in order to save money to carry out his purposes. This was said in no boastful tone, for he felt

that he had delayed already too long, and had no room to boast either his zeal or his self-denial. Had *some* men made such display of rigid virtue, I should have rejected it as affected, false, and hypocritical, but in John Brown I felt it to be as real as iron or granite.

Yet what also emerges in several portraits is a wide streak of gentleness. Though not a man of humor, Brown was also not the sort whose dedication to humanity precluded attention to the human beings around him. His extraordinary energy was not only put to building log cabins, but also to staying up all night with feverish babies. One daughter recalled Brown's tenderness toward his father as well as his wife, describing it in this sort of detail:

When [one girl] was sick he spared no pains in doing all that medical skill could do for her with the tenderest care and nursing. He sat up nights to keep the fire from going out, and to relieve mother from the constant care which she had through the day. He used to walk with the child and sing to her so much that she soon learned his step. . . . He noticed a change in her one morning and told us he thought she would not live through the day, and came home several times to see her. A little before noon he came home and looked at her and said "She is almost gone." She heard him speak, opened her eyes and put up her little wasted hands with such a pleading look that he lifted her up from the cradle with the pillows she was lying on, and carried her until she died. He was very calm, closed her eyes, folded her hands and laid her in the cradle. When she was buried father broke down completely and sobbed like a child.

v

In a century that was obsessed with epistemology, the turn to the victim had another appeal. Despite fake narratives and invented memories, judging someone to be a victim is relatively straightforward. Judging someone to be a hero is infinitely harder; we're not even certain of the criteria, much less how to balance them. Add to that the knowledge of how many claims to heroism have been abused, and it's easy to understand the impulse to leave the whole territory behind.

Yet the territory will be claimed by others, if those of us who have the chance to be reflective don't use it. The fact that concepts are abused cannot absolve us of the responsibility to try to use them properly:

reinvesting them with meaning, by carefully showing how they might make sense. Limits of space prevent me from doing more than sketch the sense that can be made here, but if John Brown's case teaches us one lesson, it's that heroes come in wholes. Success makes some of the difference; moral luck plays a role. But we can control quite a lot of the character that takes a lifetime to build. Had John Brown's life been less than exemplary, we'd be queasier about admiring his willingness to leave it. Heroes needn't be flawless; even the hero-besotted Carlyle distinguished heroes from demigods. If we study their lives in detail, we will often find detours, but usually also running threads. (Newspapers curious about Wesley Autrey discovered that, before his fifteen minutes of fame in the New York subway, he turned out to be an unusually generous and responsible man.) The moment when someone decides to leap out of the ordinary and prove her own freedom is prepared by smaller steps. That moment need not end in death. In *Moral Clarity*, I thought it crucial to portray some contemporary heroes who are very much alive. It's important, however, that all of them took major risks, and that all of them described doing so as bringing them joy.

Risk need not be mortal, but it must be more than something you take on the stock market. Thoreau was spot-on in identifying the impulse to call John Brown crazy: every model of *Homo economicus* was helpless to explain him. Here's what unites heroes like Achilles and heroes like Odysseus, for all the differences between them. (Had he been a real model of instrumental rationality, Odysseus could have saved himself a lot of anguish by stopping his ears.) Achilles (better call him John) takes risks for the sake of others, and if it takes work to decide when this kind of hero is justified, the kind of hero Odysseus stands for is even harder to determine. Elsewhere I've argued that Odysseus's combination of vitality and acceptance of fracture makes him particularly suited for modern eyes. His way with the Sirens can be seen as a showcase for complex thought and courage. Odysseus's whole life is an attempt to live with varieties of monsters, to get his hands dirty and still come out wholly alive, if never quite whole.

However often Odysseus insists that his miseries are the worst ones, he never resigns himself to being a victim. Beset by force after force that would bring most of us down, it is not his sheer survival but his capacity to be *alive*—in the very fullest sense, against the silent awareness that few of us are—that moves us. It isn't enough to make someone heroic, but without it any hero will be forgotten. Rousseau called it force of soul;

Arendt called it love of the world. You can call it charisma, as long as you admit it's just a word to mark all we don't understand.

Being wholly alive means refusing to take your life for granted, to struggle to make meaning from this little bit of time and space that's fallen to you. This means viewing your life as a project—perhaps better, an endeavor. The project needn't be something as grand as eradicating injustice, or even all the injustice in your neighborhood. But it has to have a different structure than “the sun came up and I consumed this; the sun went down and I consumed that.” Had Odysseus been able to see his life that way, he would never have left Calypso. Leopold Bloom's life is no more extraordinary than Odysseus's—both of them go through the world, do stuff, and get back to their wives—but Joyce's dazzling use of language lights up the ways in which living and merely existing are worlds apart, even if you confine your adventures to a walk around Dublin.

These kinds of heroes make us feel more alive ourselves, convinced for a moment that more things are possible than we'd hitherto dreamed. Heroes take more and they give more, and they thereby serve as standards for how to live in the world instead of merely existing in it. Heroes remind us that life itself is larger than the dimensions we are urged to accept. If heroes do nothing but throw all their weight against the purveyors of resignation—deadly and seductive as any Siren—they do a great deal. At once challenge, threat, and offering, they're a balance against all the voices that whisper *life sucks and then you die*—however high- or low-falutin the tone. Anyone whose life contains the message that we need not succumb is by that fact alone heroic.

Odysseus is such a person, but can we give him credit for it? We all recognize this property when we see it; earlier ages used words like “vital force.” It seems something both granted like grace and grasped like the prize it is. Calling it an achievement outright is unfair, since we don't start this race at the same point. Its ground is something we don't control, be it genetic levels of energy or whatever our mothers did or did not do. Differences between people on this score are clear, alas, in quite young children. But the sense of awe and delight that leads you to taste and explore every bit of the world that comes your way seems to be equally present in most babies. Heroes remind us not only of what we could be, but perhaps of what most of us have been, before whatever forces of disappointment led us to settle for less.