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## Of Heroes, Villains, and Valets

by

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20th Jefferson Lecturer in the Humanities

"No man is a hero to his valet." The dictum is generally attributed to the Duke of Condé in the reign of Louis XIV. Hegel amplified it to read: "No man is a hero to his valet, not because the former is no hero, but because the latter is a valet."

This emended version of the proverb first appeared in 1807 in Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind and was later repeated in his Philosophy of History (where he took the occasion to remind his readers that it was he who originated it, not Goethe, who had been given credit for it). Hegel had a proprietary interest in heroes because they were the "world-historical individuals" whom he saw as the crucial agents in the progress of history. By the same token, he had nothing but contempt for those small-minded men, men with the souls of valets, who reduce historical individuals to their own level of sensibility and consciousness.

What schoolmaster [Hegel asks] has not demonstrated that Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar were driven by such passions [for conquest and fame] and were, consequently, immoral? From which it immediately follows that he, the schoolmaster, is a better man than they because he has no such passions, and proves it by the fact that he has not conquered Asia nor vanquished Darius and Porus, but enjoys life and allows others to enjoy it too.

The schoolmaster looks at a historical figure and sees only a private person. He is like the valet, Hegel says, who "takes off the hero's boots, helps him into bed, knows that he prefers champagne, and the like" -- and knows nothing more about him. "Historical personages," Hegel continues, "fare badly in historical literature when served by such psychological valets. These attendants degrade them to their own level, or rather a few degrees below the level of their own morality, these exquisite discerners of spirit."

Hegel's schoolmasters are our professors. They are the academic critics who treat the masters of literature with all the reverence of a valet, who put Shakespeare to bed, so to speak, removing his boots, taking off his clothes, tucking him in, secure in the knowledge that he is only a man like themselves, and that they can read, interpret, and "deconstruct" his plays as if they had written them -- as if, to use the current jargon, he is no more "privileged" than they, as if his "authorial voice" has no more "authority" than the voice of the critic. We may also find Hegel's schoolmasters among our academic historians, who look for the essence of history not in the great events of public life but in the small events of private life, who reduce public figures to the level of private persons, who recognize no statesmen but only politicians, who see no principles in public affairs but only self-serving interests.

One can appreciate Hegel's point about heroes and valets without being quite so enthusiastic about some of his heroes. Hegel himself

does not absolve his heroes of immorality. "World-historical individuals," he says, are not very "considerate" of those who stand in their way. They are likely to "trample down many an innocent flower, crush to pieces many things" in their path. And for this they are indeed subject to "moral reprehension." They are also, he reminds us, subject to the misfortunes that commonly befall great men. They die young, like Alexander, or are murdered, like Caesar, or end their lives in exile, like Napoleon. They are not, in fact, happy men -- which may be of some consolation, Hegel observes, to those lesser, envious men who cannot "tolerate greatness and eminence" and can only "criticize the great and belittle greatness."

It may also be of some consolation to know, as Hegel tells us elsewhere, that this kind of hero, the "world-historical individual," is a thing of the past. "Once the [modern] state has been founded," he explains, "there can no longer be any heroes. They come on the scene only in uncivilized conditions." Believing England to be the most civilized of countries, Hegel would not have expected to find such heroes there. But he might have found another species of hero in the Eminent Victorians, who did not aspire to change the course of universal history and had no need, therefore, to trample underfoot "many an innocent flower." They did, however, exhibit an individuality, a force of character and mind, that provoked the schoolmasters of their own time and of later times.

Lord Byron was not, properly speaking, a Victorian, having died before the Queen ascended the throne. But he was one of the heroes of Victorian England, indeed the prototype of the "Byronic hero."

His friend, Thomas Moore (himself a popular third-rate poet), survived him long enough to write his biography (really an annotated edition of Byron's letters and journals). Moore was candid with his readers: "[We] contemplate with pleasure," he told them, "a great mind in its undress, and ... rejoice in the discovery, so consoling to human pride, that even the mightiest, in their moments of ease and weakness, resemble ourselves." Having undressed Byron and discovered him to resemble himself, Moore found it easy to revise and rearrange Byron's letters and journals to his own purposes. At one point he informed his publisher that he was getting on very well with the biography. By omitting an important letter, he was pleased to report, he eliminated one of Byron's affairs -- "making a love the less," as he put it; and by redating another affair, he moved it from the period when it actually occurred to an earlier period where it fitted in better with his own account. One wonders what Moore would have made of Byron's incestuous relationship with his half-sister, had he known of it. When that affair was revealed forty years later, it created a sensation. Tennyson was moved to protest: "What business has the public to want to know all of Byron's wildnesses? He has given them fine work, and they ought to be satisfied."

Tennyson unwittingly pointed to the crucial difference between Victorian biographies and later ones. The Victorians, even while relishing the scandals about their heroes, knew them to be scandals about their lives, not about their work. Byron's poetry was not thought to be less great, because his morals were less than

admirable. Nor were George Eliot's novels tainted by her long-standing, extra-marital affair with George Lewes. Nor was John Stuart Mill's philosophy discredited by his relationship with his great and good friend Harriet for the twenty years while she was still Mrs. John Taylor. Nor was Carlyle's intellectual reputation diminished by the revelations of his sexual "irregularities," as the Victorians delicately put it. Nor was Gladstone's political career jeopardized by his well-known habit of prowling the streets at night, seeking out prostitutes and lecturing them on the evils of their ways, sometimes bringing them home where his wife dutifully served them tea -- or hot chocolate, according to some accounts.

The case of Carlyle is the most interesting of these, because he was not only himself a hero, in the Victorian sense of that word; he was also a great celebrator of the hero. His Heroes and Hero-Worship developed a typology of heroes -- the hero as god, as prophet, as priest, as king, as poet, as man of letters -- as well as the concept of "hero-worship": the "reverence and obedience due to men really great and wise." Like Hegel before him (but without attributing it to Hegel, or for that matter, to Goethe, of whom he was a great admirer), he quoted the adage, "No man is a hero to his valet," adding that if the valet "does not know a hero when he sees him," it is because he has a "mean valet-soul." Unable to abide the idea of greatness, the valet can only cut down the hero to his own size. "Show our critics a great man," Carlyle observed, "a Luther for example, [and] they begin to what they call 'account' for him; not to worship him, but take the dimensions of him -- and bring him out to be a little kind of man."

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Carlyle's hero is a hero, not a saint, a hero to be revered for his greatness and wisdom, whatever his personal foibles and follies. Moreover, the hero is hero enough to withstand the revelations of those foibles and follies. When Sir Walter Scott's biographer was criticized for recounting some unsavory details about Scott's life, Carlyle defended him and took the occasion to deride the timid biographer who tries to make of his hero a paragon of virtue. "How delicate, decent, is English biography," Carlyle jeered, "bless its mealy mouth!" Such a biography is unworthy of its subject, he said, because it produces not the portrait of a real live hero, but rather a "white, stainless, impersonal ghost hero." Nor is it worthy of the biographer. "To produce not things, but the ghosts of things, can never be the duty of man."

Carlyle's own biographer, James Anthony Froude, quoted this review at length in the preface to his work, in order to disarm the criticism he anticipated for revealing some unflattering aspects of Carlyle's marital life. Carlyle himself, perhaps unwittingly, conspired in that revelation, when he wrote, but did not publish, his Reminiscences, and then left the manuscript to Froude as his literary executor, with permission to use it as he liked. The only details Froude withheld from his biography were the evidence (on at least one occasion) of Carlyle's physical abuse of his wife and the rumors of his impotence. These emerged when Froude wrote, but did not publish, another book on Carlyle, bequeathing that manuscript to his own children with instructions to destroy it together with all his other papers and letters. His instructions, needless to say, were ignored and the book was published.

The Victorian biographers, then (at least the best of them), were not nearly as "mealy-mouthed" as Carlyle suspected. Their heroes had feet of clay; but they were heroes nonetheless, because their heroism lay not in their feet (or in other lowly organs) but in their minds and works. Froude never intimated, and his readers never assumed, that Carlyle was less a sage because he was, in a sense, less a man. John Morley, a worthy if not quite eminent Victorian, wrote in his biography of Voltaire, à propos a not altogether creditable event in Voltaire's life: "Alas, why after all should men ... be so cheerfully ready to contemplate the hinder parts of their divinities?" The answer, of course, is that it is all too human to do so, as it is all too human of their divinities -- human, not godly, divinities -- to have such hinder parts. But it is also human, if Carlyle is to be believed, for men to revere such divinities for those qualities that make them divine -- or, as we say of mortals rather than gods -- to revere heroes for those qualities that make them heroic.

Virginia Woolf once said, only semi-facetiously, "In or about December 1910, human character changed." That was the date of the Post-Impressionist exhibit in London which had so momentous an effect on modern art and, she believed, on the modern novel. If she had been looking for a comparable change in the character of biography, she would have found it in March 1918, when her great friend, Lytton Strachey, published Eminent Victorians.

Virginia Woolf characterized this book as the prototype of the "new biography," a biography that for the first time, she said,

provided the kind of "authentic information" that revealed the real subject: "When and where did the real man live; how did he look; did he wear laced boots or elastic-sided; who were his aunts, and his friends; how did he blow his nose; whom did he love, and how; and when he came to die did he die in his bed like a Christian, or..." She did not complete the sentence, but it is clear that she thought it very likely that he had not died like a Christian -- and certainly that he had not lived like a hero.

At this point a curious reversal of roles took place. As the subject of the biography became less of a hero, the biographer himself became more of a hero.

He [the biographer, Woolf went on to say] is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even [sic] slavishly in the footsteps of his hero. Whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal.... Raised upon a little eminence which his independence has made for him, he sees his subject spread about him. He chooses; he synthesizes; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist.

Thus, while the subject was being portrayed as a "real man," a man shown blowing his nose, wearing boots of a particular kind, making love in a particular manner (the latter being of special interest in the Bloomsbury circle), the biographer had become "an artist." "Raised upon a little eminence," as Woolf says, the biographer can look down upon his subject and observe his petty, all-too-human features.

Virginia Woolf perfectly caught the distinctive quality of the new biography, in which the ostensible hero, the subject, was reduced to the status of valet, while the biographer was elevated to that of hero. From his position of artistic "eminence," Strachey



was free to belittle and deride his "Eminent Victorians." Proposing a toast to his own book, Strachey recalled a remark made by another biographer: "When I hear men called 'judicious,' I suspect them; but when I hear them called 'judicious and venerable,' I know they are scoundrels." Strachey amended this to describe his own credo: "When I hear people called 'Victorians' I suspect them. But when I hear them called 'Eminent Victorians,' I write their lives."

Strachey wrote their lives to expose and ridicule them, to reveal the private selves behind the public facades, the private vices that belied, so he thought, their public virtues. With great artistic skill, he cut his heroes down to size -- literally, in the case of Thomas Arnold, the famous headmaster of Rugby, whose legs, Strachey said, were "shorter than they should have been" -- a malicious, if not quite relevant (and perhaps not true) description of the proponent of "Muscular Christianity." Or he set the scene in such a way as to discredit his subjects: General Gordon, martyr of the siege of Khartoum, was depicted seated at a table on which there was an open Bible and an open bottle of brandy. Or he used rhetorical stratagems for satirical effect: Cardinal Newman, the most respected religious thinker in England, edited a series on the Lives of the Saints, which included biographies, Strachey conscientiously informs us, of St. Bega, St. Adamnan, St. Gundleus, St. Guthlake, Brother Drithelm, St. Amphibalus, St. Wulstan, St. Ebba, St. Neot, St. Ninian, and Cunibert the Hermit -- the enumeration of all those unfamiliar names making a mockery of the very idea of sainthood. Or he scoffed at their enthusiasms:

Florence Nightingale, given to "morbid longings" for God, whose notion of God, he wickedly commented, was a "glorified sanitary engineer"; she could hardly distinguish, he said, "between the Deity and the Drains."

In each case, Strachey attacked his heroes not only in their "hinder parts" but in their higher parts, their vital organs, the very qualities that made them heroes. This was the great difference between Victorian biography and the "new biography." The Victorians humanized their heroes, exposed their private vices without denying their public virtues. The new biographers exposed their vices (or more often follies) to dishonor them -- to make anti-heroes of them.

Yet even anti-heroes have some vestigial quality of the heroic. They are, at the very least, recognizable individuals. The Eminent Victorians, as Strachey portrayed them, were caricatures, objects of mockery, but they retained some lingering traces of eminence if only by virtue of their individuality; indeed his caricatures sometimes had the effect of making them seem more individualistic, more distinctive, than they actually were. It remained for the "new history" to complete the task of the "new biography," eliminating those last remnants of heroism by denying not only the idea of eminence but the very idea of individuality.

Two years after Strachey's book appeared, H.G. Wells inaugurated the "new history" (as it was soon baptized) with his best-selling Outline of History. Defining history as "the common adventure of all mankind," Wells professed to write a history which was not only about the "common man" but also for the common man; the common man

was both his subject and his ideal reader. In his history, he boasted, a so-called "world-historical" individual like Napoleon would be seen in proper perspective, strutting upon the crest of history like a "cockerel on a dunghill."

Today the term "common man" sounds invidious (or, perhaps, sexist); the "politically correct" terms -- which to some of us may sound equally invidious -- are the "ordinary" people, the "anonymous masses." By now these ordinary, anonymous people threaten to displace not only world-historical individuals like Napoleon, but all "elitist" figures, a term that is taken to include presidents as well as kings, working-class leaders as well as aristocrats -- all those who stand out from the anonymous masses simply by virtue of their not being anonymous, their having individual, recognizable identities. Moreover it is not only elitist individuals that are disparaged; it is elitist themes -- the great events of history in which individuals necessarily figure prominently, and the great ideas and books which are the products of great minds. In place of the old "history from above," we are enjoined to write "history from below," the history of ordinary people in the ordinary, daily activities of their lives. By such means, we are told, we may rescue the poor, anonymous masses from "the enormous condescension of posterity."

How can one quarrel with such a worthy purpose? Why should one not want to enlarge and deepen the scope of history by recovering the memory of those who have been forgotten? No sensible person, certainly no conscientious historian, would object to that. One

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might, however, reasonably object when the suspicion of "elitist" history leads to the exclusion or belittling of subjects -- great figures, great events, great ideas -- which actually determined the course of history, for all people. One might also object when "history from below" itself becomes an exercise in condescension -- when the historian denies to the ordinary people ideas, motives, and interests over and above the ordinary concerns of their daily lives. For it is then not only the historian who is reduced to the level of valet, who cannot see anything heroic in history. It is also the people who are reduced to that level, who are denied any aspect of the heroic, any connection with a "universal consciousness," as Hegel would say, an order of being that elevates them above the immediate, mundane, particular circumstances of their lives.

This point was brought vividly home to me a few years ago when I wrote an essay arguing that the great events of history were not only important in themselves but were important to the ordinary people of the time, and, indeed, were of great interest to those people. Among my critics was a well-known social historian who protested that political events were, and still are, of little concern to ordinary people. Surely, he said, the vast majority of people have always thought that "where they lived and how they made a living, who they married, and what happened to their children" were far more important than "who won the last election." I was struck by the arrogance of that comment -- as if only a Harvard

professor could be expected to care about his job, home, and children -- and also about the last election.

The latest display of this professional deformation is the attack on the "canon" on the grounds that it is dominated by "Dead White Males" -- "DWMs," as they are familiarly known. I was introduced to a variation on this term -- "BGs," "Big Guys" -- by the head of the Women's Studies program in a distinguished college, who explained that the problem is not only that these Big Guys are Guys, but that they are Big, thus "privileging," as she put it, great books, ideas, and events -- and, worse, privileging the very idea of greatness, of genius, of the unique person seeking transcendent truths that are presumed to have enduring value. This idea itself -- the idea that there is such a thing as greatness, genius, uniqueness, that people should celebrate and aspire to such qualities, that there are truths that transcend race, gender, and class, and that all people, even ordinary people, can share in such truths and be elevated by them -- all of this, she insisted, is a peculiarly masculine idea. And it can only be rectified, she went on, by creating a feminist "counter-canon" representing women who embody peculiarly feminine values -- women poets who say, "I'm not creating this poem for eternity"; and women writers who say, "I don't want to celebrate transcendent truths, I want to celebrate the little things in women's lives ... the small nurturing things that women do."

I would like to think that this is an extreme attitude, that most feminists do not want to replace the canon of "BGs," Big Guys,

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with a counter-canon of "LGs," Little Gals. But the presumption against greatness goes deep. It is, in fact, at the heart of the debate about "great books." The argument is no longer about the specific composition of the canon, the inclusion of this or that book, but about the very idea of greatness, a greatness that traditionally has been thought to transcend race, gender, and class -- and genre, too -- so that it was once taken for granted that Shakespeare is more worthy of study than Superman, that high culture is higher, more elevating, than popular culture, and that some events in history are more momentous than others. The feminist who would relegate women to the "little things" of life -- consigning them, an old-fashioned feminist might say, to the kitchen -- is diminishing and trivializing their lives, as surely as the historian who assumes that ordinary people are indifferent to politics, to public affairs beyond the province of their daily lives. Even Hegel, not noted for his democratic proclivities, gave the ordinary people a larger role than that. Those people who are immersed in the particularity of their lives, even they, he said, have access to the "universal"; they partake of the universal by virtue of their membership in the state, whose laws and institutions elevate them above the particular and give them a role in the evolving course of history.

Recently we were presented with dramatic evidence of the Hegelian thesis in a form that Hegel, I like to think, would have appreciated. This is a fitting occasion to commend the National Endowment for the Humanities for its part in the production of that

extraordinary film, "The Civil War." It is, as Hegel might have said, "no accident" that the Endowment took the initiative in that enterprise, for it is a perfect illustration of what is meant by the "humanities."

Among other things, the film exemplifies the heroic nature of a great historical event: an event whose greatness is not obscured, and was not obscured at the time, by the multitude of small events of which it was comprised -- the muck and mire of battlefields, of generals competent and incompetent, of soldiers maimed and dying. For all of that, the Civil War was, from beginning to end, a great national, political, social, and ideological event, which can be only understood (as the film makes clear) by a skillful combination of "history from above" and "history from below" -- the magnificent rhetoric of Lincoln's speeches complementing the homely and very moving rhetoric of soldiers writing to their wives. It was a truly heroic event in which privates in the army and newly liberated slaves were as much the heroes as generals and statesmen, partaking in the "universal," as Hegel would have said, and being elevated by that universality even, unhappily, as it often destroyed them.

The problem with a valet-like conception of history is not only its denigration of greatness and heroism but also its denigration of individuality and freedom. A century-and-a-half ago Tocqueville anticipated just this problem. In a remarkably prescient and very brief chapter (only three or four pages) of Democracy in America, entitled "Some Characteristics Peculiar to Historians in Democratic Centuries," Tocqueville described the essential distinction between

the old history and the new. In aristocratic periods, he said, historians tend to "attribute everything that happens to the will and character of particular men ..., and unhesitatingly suppose slight accidents to be the cause of the greatest revolutions." In democratic periods, on the other hand, they tend to "attribute hardly any influence over the destinies of mankind to individuals.... But they make general causes responsible for the smallest particular events" -- causes such as "the nature of races, the physical character of the country, or the spirit of civilization." The danger, Tocqueville warned, was that in belittling or ignoring individual will in the making of history, the historian also belittles "human freedom."

A cause so vast that it acts at the same time on millions of men, and so strong that it bends them all together in the same direction, may easily seem irresistible. Seeing that one does yield to it, one is very near believing that one cannot stand up to it.

Thus historians who live in democratic times do not only refuse to admit that some citizens may influence the destiny of a people, but also take away from the people themselves the faculty of modifying their own lot and make them depend either on an inflexible providence or on a kind of blind fatality.

Tocqueville's remarks apply to determinisms of every kind -- the economic determinism of Marxism, or the geographic and demographic determinism of the French school of Annalistes, or the deterministic trinity currently popular in America -- race, gender, and class. Each has the same effect of belittling the will, ideas, actions, and freedom of individuals. Today more than ever we have reason to heed Tocqueville's words: "It is important not to let this idea [of free



will] grow dim, for we need to raise men's souls, not to complete their prostration."

Without will, without individuals, there are no heroes. But neither are there villains. And the absence of villains is as prostrating, as soul-destroying, as the absence of heroes. About the same time that the Duke of Condé coined the proverb, "No man is a hero to his valet," another French notable, La Rochefoucauld, enunciated another important truth: "There are heroes of evil as well as of good." The two maxims may be amalgamated: "No man is a hero to his valet, and no man is a villain to his valet." To the valet the master is a man like all men -- someone whose boots have to be removed, who has to be helped into bed, who has a taste for champagne. The valet may even know other things about him, whether he is a good or bad master, a good or bad husband and father. What the valet will not know is whether he is a hero or a villain -- a great statesman or philosopher, or it may be, a tyrant or charlatan.

Nor will the historian know these things, if the historian adheres to the currently fashionable theory of history known as structuralism. According to this theory, the decisive facts about Nazism, for example, are not the ideas, policies, or even actions of Hitler and the Nazis, but the structure of the German state, the nature of its bureaucracy and pressure groups, the exigencies of economics and geography. The effect of this structuralist analysis is as Tocqueville predicted: to depreciate the importance of individuals, ideas, and will -- to belittle the role of Hitler and the Nazi leaders, to minimize or even deny their avowed intentions

of conquest and mass murder, and thus evade the issue of evil. As Lucy Dawidowicz, the author of the monumental work, The War Against the Jews, put it: "The structuralists have thus eliminated the exercise of free will in human society and deprived men and women of their capacity to choose between good and evil."

To "structuralize" Nazism is to trivialize it, to make evil banal. It is also to "de-historicize" it, to belie the facts of history. The ideas and intentions, the wilful policies and actions of Nazis are surely as much the reality of history as the structure of the state, of peer groups and bureaucracies, of economic and geo-military forces. Even to understand the "unanticipated consequences" of ideas and policies, it is necessary to understand the ideas and policies that gave rise to those consequences. Structuralists criticize the traditional historian of Nazism for the fallacy, as they see it, of "personalizing" history -- as if one of the basic principles of Nazism were not the "Fuerher principle," deifying precisely the person of Hitler; or for the fallacy of "intentionalism" -- as if Hitler had not publicly announced his intentions and as if those intentions were not literally, all too literally, executed.

The same structuralist analysis has been applied to the history of the Soviet Union under Stalin. The new "cohort" of historians (as they refer to themselves) do not see Stalinism as a form of totalitarianism, a tyranny imposed by the Stalinist regime in accord with Communist ideology. Indeed they deny that either the regime or the ideology was responsible for most of the events of that time.

The policies and actions associated with Stalin, they say, were more often improvised than part of a deliberate strategy, reflecting pressures from "social constituencies," from groups "below" rather than from the regime above. This interpretation has the effect, the structuralists are pleased to report, of undermining "the totalitarian model of the Stalinist system to the point where it is no longer worth using." One of these historians explains that such concepts as totalitarianism and the terror are obsolete because they are the products of the cold war mentality and "anticommunist hysteria" that had unfortunately infected the older scholars. Another finds them objectionable because they are moral judgments, and "judging Stalin," he says, "is an exercise in moral imperialism."

The new school claims that the impersonal, non-judgmental language of structuralism is more objective, because it is less moralistic and political, than the old terms of discourse. This argument might be more plausible, were it not itself part of an overtly political interpretation of Soviet history. A historian of the traditional school explains why it is precisely for reasons of objectivity that the historian must confront the facts of terror and totalitarianism.

Historians must write about the terror not in order to vent their indignation, but because that subject is essential to our understanding of absolutely every aspect of Soviet life in the 1930s. Terror was not an epiphenomenon. It is not a topic like the history of Soviet sports or Soviet opera. Because of the terror, parents talked differently to their children, writers wrote differently, workers and managers talked to one another differently.... Because of the terror, millions perished.... Whatever topics we choose, we cannot get away from the fact that those were murderous times and Stalinism was a murderous system.

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The traditional historian may be comforted by the fact that the revisionist school is not dominant in Soviet history, any more than it is in German history. But it is by no means insignificant, especially among younger historians who pride themselves on being on the "cutting edge" of the discipline. To be sure, now that Soviet leaders have themselves confessed to some -- not yet all -- of the murderous facts of the Communist regime, it may be a little more difficult for historians, however sophisticated, to dispute them. But only a little more difficult. An ingenious historian can always find ways of eluding reality.

One such historian, the father of historical structuralism and the most influential leader of the Annaliste school, is Fernand Braudel. Braudel's celebrated work, The Mediterranean in the Time of Philip II, is a model of Annaliste doctrine: the doctrine that the long-term, inanimate, impersonal forces of history -- geography, demography, ecology, economics -- are the "deeper realities" of history, in contrast to short-term events which are ephemeral and superficial. In Braudel's work, these short-term events include not only the wars and conquests of Philip's reign but also the Inquisition and the Renaissance. In a memorable passage, Braudel compares such short-term events to fireflies that glow briefly in the night and quickly disappear, leaving behind no illumination, no trace of their existence. Another distinguished Annaliste, Le Roy Ladurie, has offered an equally memorable definition of real history, long-term history, as "history without people."

Braudel's book is an extraordinary feat of scholarship, if only because he wrote it from memory, without benefit of libraries or archives, while he was in a prisoner of war camp in Germany during World War II. He later recalled the temper of mind in which he had written it. It was, he said, "a direct existential response to the tragic times I was passing through."

All those occurrences [he recalled] which poured in upon us from the radio and the newspapers of our enemies, or even the news from London which our clandestine receivers gave us -- I had to outdistance, reject, deny them. Down with occurrences, especially vexing ones! I had to believe that history, destiny, was written at a much more profound level.

The "occurrences" or "short-term events" that Braudel sought to "outdistance, reject, deny" were nothing less than one of the most devastating wars in modern history and one of the most catastrophic events of all times, the Holocaust, both of which were precipitated not by the long-term forces of history but by individuals who surely deserve the epithet, "heroes of evil." What is most extraordinary is that it was while Braudel was in prison, experiencing personally, existentially, the brunt of that evil, that he persuaded himself that such individuals and short-term events were of little significance in history. The Holocaust as a "short-term" event -- the mind boggles.

At the same time that Braudel was in that German prisoner of war camp writing the consummate product of Annaliste history, a young literary critic in this country (about the same age as Braudel) was reviewing a new edition of a much older Annals, that of Tacitus.

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Lionel Trilling was impressed by a sentence in the Annals which seemed to him to capture the essence of that work. "This I regard as history's highest function," Tacitus wrote, "to let no worthy action be uncommemorated, and to hold out the reprobation of posterity to evil words and deeds." Trilling was not a historian -- it is very unlikely that he had heard of the Annalistes, who were then little known even among professional historians. But he was acutely aware of the history of his own times, of Nazism and Stalinism. And he was superbly alert to intellectual fashions, to the predilection, for example, of modern historians for the "long view," a view, Trilling suspected, that obscured and even justified the evils of history. "To minds of a certain sensitivity," he observed, "'the long view' is the falsest historical view of all, and indeed the insistence on the length of perspective is intended precisely to overcome sensitivity -- seen from a sufficient distance, it says, the corpse and hacked limbs are not so very terrible, and eventually they even begin to compose themselves into a 'meaningful pattern'."

Trilling, like Tocqueville before him, preferred an older mode of history, a history capable, as Tacitus said, of commemorating "worthy actions" and reprobating "evil words and deeds" -- a history of heroes and villains as well as ordinary people. And that mode of history is inconsistent with the determinism implicit in the "long view" -- those "general causes," that Tocqueville spoke of, causes that deny free will and belittle human freedom. In one of his last public appearances shortly before his death, Trilling said that he

thought of himself as "a nineteenth-century person because he still believed in the efficacy of the will at a time when few other intellectuals did." Asked to comment on structuralism, he said that "thirty years ago he had fought against Stalinism and that he would, if he were young, fight structuralism today as another system antithetical to will and individual freedom."

It is fitting for me today, on the twentieth anniversary of the Jefferson lectureship, to recall those words from the first of the Jefferson lecturers -- all the more fitting because they provide a text for my own theme. For without will and freedom, there can be no virtue and vice. And without virtue and vice, there can be no heroes and villains. There can only be valets -- valets who recognize no heroes whether of good or of evil, indeed who recognize no greatness of any kind: no momentous events in history, no superior works of art, literature, or philosophy, no essential distinction between the trivial and the important. If such a valet mentality prevailed, we would all, the most humble and the most eminent of us, be diminished by it. Fortunately, there is that in the human spirit that cannot long tolerate such an abasement. Having recently witnessed the extraordinary affirmation of freedom and will in Eastern Europe, we may begin to hope that our schoolmasters will be edified and elevated by these events -- great events, complete with heroes, villains, and valets.