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THE NEGATION OF THE HEROIC FIGURE IN *THE GREAT FIRE OF LONDON*

Ferah İNCESU

Peter Ackroyd's novel *The Great Fire of London* (*GFL*), which was first published in 1982, having close references to Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, is a work in which any attempt to construct, to be or to do is undermined, neutralised or fails. With such constriction, loss and void, the heroic figure, its possibilities and options, are negated. The hero/heroine cannot realise him/herself in the contexts of the book. Alongside the futility in social and collective spheres and projects, incompetence also prevails in the personal realm of the individual and in his/her ontological strata.

The theme and plot of the novel rely on a multifarious structure. With consecutive main characters and their focalised view points in narrative sections the audience is introduced to various human characteristics and cases, the individual's options of identity in society, and further to a modern English society's panorama, and infrequently and fragmentarily to the world politics and global insecurity. In such a world how can you be a hero? Is the heroic presence restricted to existence?

The figure of the hero or heroine is embedded into human cultures. As it socio-culturally functions as a deep and vital ingredient, even its non-existence or lack recalls and alludes to it. The hero is basically a social figure even if his/her heroism necessitates or includes discrepancy or isolation. On the one hand, the hero substantiates or stands for societal necessities and possibilities; on the other hand, he/she constitutes basic survival devices or provisions. A *Longman Dictionary* definition of the hero is "a person remembered for bravery, strength, or goodness, esp. when admired for an act of courage under difficult conditions", while its second meaning is given as "the most important character in a play, poem, story, etc." ("Hero"). The definition suggests the social aspect immediately in the act of remembering and superiority by referring to admiration. The second meaning also relies on this sociality and distinction as the hero is the special element within a fictional realm. While heroism is meaningful in a societal framework, the hero also inhabits a self-contained dimension as he/she is unique with the attribution of superiority and pre-eminence. As in the definition, his/her supremacy could be physical and/or moral. The attribute of perseverance against adversity constitutes the individualistic core of this position and manifests the instinctive survival urges. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* similarly defines the hero as "the main character in a literary work" and summarises the attributes of the heroic figures of ancient legends and epics: "they transcend ordinary men in skill, strength, and courage. . . . War or dangerous adventure is the hero's normal occupation. . . . surrounded by noble peers, magnanimous to his followers and ruthless to enemies. . . . he is resourceful . . . and lives by a personal code of honour . . . men, who suffer pain and death, but in defiance of this live gallantly and fully, and create, through their own efforts, a moment's glory that survives in the memory of their descendants." ("Hero") *The Encyclopedia Americana* indicates the scope of heroism: "A man can be a hero because of

unusual bravery, nobility of action, moral and intellectual qualities, or contributions either to the improvement of man's lot or to a given society. . . . The hero stands out from ordinary men by his superiority in one or more spheres and is held up as the embodiment of certain ideals and values of the society or group that honors him." (Mades) A survey of the literary usage of this figure is also given:

> The warrior hero is generally the main subject of the earliest historical writings and of the epic. . . .
> The ideal heroic type in the Middle Ages was the knight, often in the service of the church. In the romance, the knight's heroic exploits were in the service of ladies, or heroines, who served as his inspiration. . . . the knight sought to impress his lady with his refined manners as well as with his prowess.
> In the Italian Renaissance the knight developed into the ideal courtier type . . . a model of every virtue and refinement in addition to his military prowess. . . . the forerunner of the modern gentleman.
> To Thomas Carlyle the ideal hero, as described in his *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), was the kind of vigorous inspiring leader, who determines the course of history. . . . the modern cult of the individual as hero. . . .
> The literary heroine has many attributes of the hero. Although she too may be characterized by superhuman courage, . . . She is more apt to be portrayed as a heroine by virtue of her nobility, fortitude, or strength of character. (Mades)

A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms also defines the "anti-hero" as an "inversion, not a banishment, of his classical archetype." ("Hero") The etymological explanation of the word also loads it with authority and provision: "'man of superhuman strength or courage,' from L. heros 'hero,' from Gk. heros 'demi-god' . . . , originally 'defender, protector,' from PIE base ser- 'to watch over, protect' (cf. L. servare 'to save, deliver, preserve, protect')" ("Hero"). Pertinently, identification with a traditionally heroic figure points to an individualistic integrity and preservation of the self. The hero figure or the stance of the hero, like a godly or motherly figure, presents direct or indirect teachings for the individual's life and struggles.

In most cases the heroic character has a goal. His/her existence, efforts, deeds and attitude all serve that aim. In order to fulfil this purpose such a figure puts forward all his/her devices. It is perceived that both on the collective and on the egoistical level the hero figure practises and activates the framework of the psyche or the organism on the earth. So as to achieve the specific duty, in other words, in order to realise his/her particular function, the hero should be strong, persistent, resistant and resourceful. In the process the hero's self-preservation is equated with the protection of his/her aim. While he/she remains safe and sound, possibilities

of the battle against adversity and for the attainment of the target are sure and great. The hero comes to be a figure whose self-love means social love.

Disillusioned audience and authors of the contemporary world have trimmed the hero figure and heroism into restricted or, in another sense and view, into meagre, modest, probable and ordinary areas or outcome. Humane figures, moral figures, figures attaining a degree of sensitivity, consciousness, or having a place or finding a path in a chaotic, hostile, difficult, inhuman, fluctuating world become the heroic ones at hand. Meanwhile in contemporary culture and popular literature and cinema omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent hero motifs also continue and come to the foreground. Yet, the dwindling territory, activity, prowess and significance of the hero figure leads to its nonexistence as well. On a planet proceeding to its destruction and annihilation, mere survival, or ontological phenomena constitute triumph.

Accordingly, we cannot find heroism in *The Great Fire of London* in the traditional sense. Although the novel exploits the hero motif, tinges of success or redemption are questionable, insubstantial and functionless. The organisation of the text and the narrative technique also display a lack of the hero literally in the sense of a specific, overt protagonist, a state which points to the metaphorical void of heroism. While the plot is unfolded by alternating focalisation of the characters and their viewpoints in successive sections, each of these characters, their lives, problems and concerns, and their tales become prominent and primary.

The opening is done with the character Arthur Feather, who is the proprietor of a small funhouse at the arcade under an abandoned railway bridge. Even his stature is a negation of the traditional hero. He is a dwarf. The omniscient third person narrator refers to him as Little Arthur throughout the text. The order of life he has composed for himself as described at the very beginning of the book first compensates for his lacks and deprivations: "At 8.15 Little Arthur unlocks his office, at the back of the arcade, to switch on the electric current. . . . This is the moment of his triumph, when the powers of the earth enter Fun City and turn it into his magic cave." (6) Accordingly, on his way to the place, to the newspaper seller's question "How are we keeping this morning, then, Arthur?" he replies "Oh, we keep, don't we, we keep." (6) This implicitly recalls the etymological connotation of the hero as keeper. It is no coincidence that his name refers to the legendary hero, King Arthur. Being a proprietor, Arthur Feather is a kind of authority, businessman, and has a task to do. Though with limited powers, he still has a socioeconomic entity and identity. His job is also associated with the imagination and the ability to generate an alternative world and reality against mundane life.

Yet even this little heroism, personal, moral achievement comes to an end very quickly and is trampled by external forces. That morning he receives an official letter from Leisure and Amusement Products Ltd. Company finalising the lease of the funhouse owing to their rationalisation policy. Thus, Little Arthur loses the centre and meaning of his life on the second page of the book. Consequently, this physically and emotionally maimed, lonely person, who could never cry again after the stop of his growth at the age of 8, and who speaks to a girl's photo cut from the newspaper, is alienated from the outside reality and social life. A hostile and exploitative notion of "they" emerges in his mind. In his isolation and paranoia, he perceives a

neighbour girl as his "little love" and "angel" deceived and taken by them. He takes on himself a perverted mission: "He will make a point of saving her – make a point of it. All that innocence cannot go to pot." (42) At the park to which the girl escapes from him, in delusions Little Arthur suffocates and kills her. It is very ironic that in madness and unreal heroism he becomes a murderer and annihilates a fresh life. In this contemporary world of economic strains, political inefficiency, social fragmentation, universal insecurity, one would not witness a heroic knight, who brings his community illumination, contributes to a nicer and merrier lifestyle, saves lives, helps females and reinforces future and posterity. In confinement, by impairing the electric system, Arthur sets prisoners free, but most probably for the same world and conditions.

Audrey Skelton is a female counterpart. The second section introduces her to the audience. In her case, madness results in unemployment. At the opening she is an operator at the telephone exchange. Her living conditions are limited and shabby (8, 31-32). She is fed up with the routine, scarcity and boredom of her life. As a resort she escapes into alternative worlds in her mind: "Audrey was a Russian princess . . . a poetess . . . a millionairess, an actress, an opera singer" (8). After she learns from a friend at work that she is living at the site of a historical prison, she is obsessed by Dickens's Little Dorrit character. As if Little Dorrit were a real person with a secret or hidden treasure, attaining a city map, she marks the spots of the novel to get a meaningful clue. She prays on her knees for herself and her father Mr Dorrit, and their wealth. On a film shooting day she slaps the merry actress claiming she does not behave like Little Dorrit. As the imaginary world dominates ordinary daily life, she begins to ignore and abuse her job. Sometimes she does not answer calls, distracts clients or deliberately gives wrong answers. When one day she delves into her panel with a nail-file causing a short circuit and preventing the work, she is dismissed.

In resentment for her deficient life and in her delusion, like Arthur, she renders a hostile and exploitative "they" concept. She says "I told you, didn't I, about the clever ones. Now they've gone and told the Post Office to give me the push." (142) Like Arthur she thinks of her love in association with the inimical society: "They've taken you for a ride and you know it." (143) Ironically, this red-haired madwoman has a consistent and verifiable political consciousness and her views also parallel those of the university lecturer (81-2). Once she says:

> I've been thinking about that prison and all the poor souls who passed through there, Mr Phillips. There has been so much suffering and distress around here, there really has. It makes me sick to think about it. . . . when you think of how this government is treating the poor and the unemployed, it can't really be all that different now from what it was then, can it? All those young boys begging down by the station – wasn't that a Victorian thing, too, all that? (33)

On the day her lighted match makes a blemish on her carpet, she declares revenge: "They can't break me down. They don't know what they're dealing with in Audrey Skelton." (142) The power and passion within her, her ability to visualise alternative worlds, the mission

of the revenge plot, her social consciousness and her moral empathy with the disadvantaged allude to the hero figure. She even takes her "revenge"; she achieves her goal to demolish the film set. Yet, as in the case of Arthur, her deluded heroism and its results are far away from the traditional and genuine mode. Like Arthur's, though hers is indirect, perverted heroism can only beget an innocent death. The director, Spenser Spender is knocked down by the flamed awning at the plateau which is set on fire by Audrey. It is also suggestive that Audrey is a failing, unfulfilled artist figure as well if her remarks about aspiring to be a writer once are true. Her arid conditions have not turned her to one and thus a defeated would-be artist also makes another struggling would-be artist lost. In Ackroyd's book constrained and distorted art destroys art instead of functioning as a vehicle and site of heroism liberating, enlightening and refining.

Again it is very ironic that these acts of vandalism and murder are committed with a sense of redemption. Audrey makes the young tramps begging at the station her accomplices. Their red-haired leader, Audrey's other counterpart, conveys her remarks: "There's an old dump up the road she says she wants to burn down. . . . She says it's a public nuisance. I say we can give her a hand." (161) On their arrival the state of the spot solidifies their decision: "It didn't look right; it was false, flimsy. . . . It was an eye-sore, the red-headed tramp said, a genuine eye-sore. They would be doing London a favour." (162) But, the fire on the riverside grows. Thus, these young unemployed, crazy citizens constitute a parody of the heroine and the knights. The enlightenment, salvation, new life and prospects they generate are ironically misdeeds. They are inverted Promethean figures. Their fire is not of the ritual purifying element either:

> It inflicted disaster and destruction upon the city, razing offices and homes, blasting the lives of those who worked and lived in them. It destroyed much that was false and ugly, and much that was splendid or beautiful. Some longed for it to burn everything, but for others a new and disquieting sense of impermanence entered their lives. Eventually, legends were to grow around it. It was popularly believed to have been a visitation, a prophecy of yet more terrible things to come. (165)

The traditionally heroic figure is in affinity with his civilisation and its values. The elevation of art is one of the tenets of the Western civilisation also. Yet, the destruction of the plateau on the Thames's side also functions as a metaphor for an antagonism against art. It is a further irony in this compact text that, owing to the struggles for his film project, Spenser Spender appears like a Don Quiote figure. Limited economic conditions, sponsors, film companies or institutions, unions, academics, all on different levels constitute barriers to the artistic outcome along with Spenser's personal frailties and obsessions. The whole community seems not to support art and the artist. Thus, the act of the madwoman and vagrants is only an extension of the general hostility towards art.

Again undermining a heroic stance, due to the collective nature of the film, in his seemingly heroic and artistic quest the powers required for his project are outside Spenser. As he plans to shoot the parts of the novel presenting a social panorama with different crowded groups, a crew of many dramatic artists and extras would be needed. Setting, technical equipment, post-production process in the studio, operators and paperwork to obtain these, all would directly put Spenser in a team work and institutionalisation. Not only manpower but also a great financial force is required by the cinema. Since Spenser would not afford the requirements by himself like a powerful producer, he is deprived of a conventional hero's omnipotence and omniscience. He is a man restricted and in agonies of creation.

Spenser feels himself dissatisfied, deficient, castrated and like a factory item: "It was unnerving, also, to discover that his project, which he had hugged so closely to himself that it had in a sense become part of him, had already been the subject of meetings, conversations, arguments . . . he had gone in as an inventor, as a free agent, and had come out as a servant - or, rather, as an employee." (53-4) The scriptwriter and the cast are also determined by the Film Finance Board. On the point of financial victory and concretisation of his idea, Spenser, ironically, begins to emerge as a loser figure. He cannot conform to the romanticised heroic unconventional artist figure as a supposedly not materialistic, free aesthetic innovator. Spenser, who believes in the opposition between the artist and the artisan, the prevalence of which is a topic in Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (5, 13, 52, 66, 82, 108, 111-5, 127), feels himself degraded.

Laetitia Spenser is another figure in the novel that functions as an anti-hero. As in the cases of other main characters, she reflects only a ghost of the heroic figure. Like an old-fashioned conventional heroine, Laetitia is beautiful and the centre of a man's life. Yet, the text never allows such a traditional construction. She was once a model and is still attractive, yet jobless confined into home with boredom and television. Though without her Spenser's life is a void, being deserted by his mother in childhood his love is basically an emotional dependence deprived of mature communication and intercourse. Spenser calls her also "Lettuce", which displeases Laetitia, in her words confirming "her status merely as an object." (45) Rather than being a conventional heroine who would lead a heroic man to behave morally better and also to save her, Laetitia is being metaphorically killed by her husband with his neglect of her needs and aspects of personality. Her affair with a lover, which is unconventional for a typical, moral heroine, results in another unsatisfactory relationship and her attempt at suicide. This is an extension of Spenser's metaphorical murder of Laetitia. Spenser is distant to the heroic artist figure, which is sensitive, reformative, renovating and constructive in the moralistic and/or romantic conceptualisations (Shiner, 193-5, 197). After her attempt at disloyalty and suicide, Laetitia, who already lacks self-confidence, survives but her troubled soul dies. While waiting for her husband to take her home from hospital, she thinks to herself "I am a person of little consequence and I will behave like one." (153) As an anti-heroine, Laetitia can serve and triumph neither for others nor for herself.

Canadian academic Rowan Phillips, who is also a figure of the artist, furthers the lack of heroism in the novel. He also reflects a shadow of the hero. He has academic accomplishments,

is appointed to lecture in Cambridge, and has also written a novel. He is chosen to write the script of Spenser's film. Yet, he is a problematic personage and deviates from conventional heroism too. In the first scene about him he wakes from a nightmare after a night of drunkenness, for which he expresses remorse: "He had been drinking; he tried to hold on to his personality, which was trying to escape. I must stop all this." (19) He does not seem much content with himself. He also betrays art. The idea of writing the script leads him to expect wealth and prestige (85). For their first talk he invites the director Spenser to Cambridge so as to influence him with this institutionalised culture site, which functions like a trade mark. He even betrays Dickens on which he studies. To impress Spenser he replaces a Mondrian print with a portrait of Dickens the night before. This hypocrisy and artificiality turns Dickens, an artist, into a site on which dishonesty and greed are committed whereas Dickens unfolds a criticism of industrialisation, exploitation and duplicity in his works. Relevantly the narrator indicates unacademic factors concerning his visitation to England: "Perhaps it was for Dickens's sake that he had bought a small flat in Gray's Inn Road – to be close to his 'material'. But he doubted it. Rowan was a homosexual, and it was his fantasy that really lured him to the city. . . . In London he could be free." (19-20) Unlike the conventional hero, Rowan does not carry communal anxieties but his journey serves for self gratification and his wisdom not for moral aims but for self indulgence. Rowan's betrayal of art and the artist is substantiated by his indirect involvement with Spenser's death. In his selfishness Rowan does not risk himself to help Spenser on whom the great awning falls in flames: "If he moved quickly, he might be able to pull Spenser from beneath the awning. But he was afraid for his life, staring at the burning heap" (164). His hesitation, disability, egoism, fear, and lack of loyalty and comradeship all negate the conventional heroic figure.

On the other side of the plateau Timothy Coleman saves his beloved Audrey. He is the only heroic figure in the novel in the traditional sense. His qualification of the saviour is also reinforced by an allusion to Christ with the remark of turning the other cheek to an opponent; the strained Timothy holds his cheek in several scenes as if beaten. Yet, the plights included in the plot do not allow Timothy to function as a typical, competent and well-functioning hero. The general restricted socioeconomic conditions and the inefficient health and legal systems would not change in the fictional realm of the book. Audrey's life is redeemed by Timothy only to survive in the same conditions. Timothy is not an efficiently operating Christ figure. He has a weak personality, prone to impositions and control by the others. He lets himself be involved in both Audrey's and Rowan's affairs. Audrey makes an accomplice out of him as she learns about the film on *Little Dorrit* through him, and Rowan turns Tim into his lover. The gentleness of the Christ figure becomes frailty and imperfection in Timothy. Timothy finds himself confused and lost in a world he cannot understand well and in barren living conditions: "Under the stress of these events, he went swimming more and more frequently. But . . . the sounds and shouts of the pool seemed to him more like echoes of a mad house, a vast chamber of disorder. The murder of the girl by the now notorious Little Arthur had upset him almost as much as Audrey's behaviour. He could remember Little Arthur and Fun City from the time of his childhood, and now that world has been snatched from him." (61-2)

The Great Fire of London discloses many unheroic characters in traditional terms and exploits allusions to the Victorian period in its hard times, social conditions and conflicts alongside the historical great fire in London in the chaotic Restoration period together with the unsafe, exploitative, unfriendly contemporary world. In such plights heroism is constrained into mere survival, the pure/mere ability to go on.

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