

ROMANTIC AND QUIXOTIC HEROES IN DETECTIVE FICTION

The study of major heroic figures and their posterity in world literature has traditionally been the subject of that field of comparative literature known as thematology or thematics—*Stoffgeschichte*, *thématologie*—and particularly of those works concerned with named personages, using Propp's words, or myths. But there are other possibilities in the study of heroes and their progeny, namely, the study of the heroic traditions or patterns which these figures may generate beyond their names and beyond their explicit traits as personages. This task is therefore more formal—or at least situated at the crossroads of themes and forms or genres—and, as a consequence, has been excluded from the study of myths. My aim in this note is to illustrate briefly this concept of heroic pattern and its possibilities by outlining two of the most important heroic traditions in fiction—those of the romantic hero and its antagonist, the quixotic hero—and by tracing their presence in detective fiction. Whether this concept of pattern or tradition should be accommodated into the concept of myth through a theoretical enlargement of this latter—so as to talk of the myths of the knight errant and of the Quixote—or it should rather remain as a separate concept, that might be the topic of a longer essay or even of a book. In this note I will simply suggest how these two traditions have been used as formal or generic patterns to give shape to opposite attitudes in the assessment of man's competence or abilities as an individual—corresponding, in general terms, to different worldviews and narrative modes, those of romance and realism—and of a prevailing or past culture—in the romantic tradition to assert its validity and continuity, in the quixotic one to undermine it and to advocate change.

1. The hero of chivalric romance, as created by Chrétien de Troyes in the 12th century in such works as *Érec et Énid*, *Lancelot*, or *Yvain*, possesses two features that interest us. (i) He fulfils the expectations and fantasies of the readers both on personal or individual grounds—since he is endowed with all the qualities, and these to a superlative degree, that a contemporary reader would like to have, and probably lacks—and on collective or social grounds—since he embodies the values and worldview of a social group, the courtly aristocracy of Chrétien's time, whose triumph he dramatizes in his deeds. It is important to realize, however, that he dramatizes that worldview and its triumph at a time when it is seriously menaced and challenged by alternative worldviews of different social groups (merchants, townsmen) and of an increasingly powerful monarchy, as Erich Köhler has shown. Therefore, the romance hero is a wish-fulfilment dream that improves upon reality, the result of a transformation, or rather an enchantment, of reality. (ii) A second aspect of this hero which interests us is that his mission, his quest, is a social or collective one as well as a way of perfection and personal maturation, of self-searching. He takes up the challenge launched to the Arthurian court or to its values, not to himself personally, and his triumph is the triumph of that world that is behind him and supports him, the social group or order he represents and whose validity he proves and maintains by his deeds. In this sense he is a redeemer, a messiah, the representative of a world larger than him where he is perfectly integrated. This integration or harmony with society is nowhere best shown than in the Arthurian banquet, the departing-point of the knight errant's adventure where the challenge is uttered, and where he returns and his triumph is celebrated at the end. We could trace the metamorphoses of the knight errant in English, Spanish, or Italian literature, as represented by Gawain, Amadís, or Orlando, but the pattern remains basically the same.

2. The quixotic hero first formulated by Cervantes in *Don Quijote* (1605, 1615) is a direct response to the romance hero and to this romantic pattern, in both aspects. This is attained by virtue of the bi-dimensionality of the quixotic figure. (i) On the one hand, don Quijote is a deluded comic fool—and therefore an anti-hero—whose reliance upon romance literature for his ideas about the world and his punctilious imitation of the knights errant he has read about, prevents him from perceiving reality correctly and leads him through a series of disastrous encounters. Because of this fatal reliance, his character suggests a critique of romance/heroic literature and underscores the limitations that reality imposes on romantic fantasy. This hero is not the

result of a transformation or enchantment of reality according to the laws of desire, but a realization of reality as opposed to fantasy, to romance. This is true in a personal or individual sense—since don Quixote highlights the limitations of human beings rather than their excellencies: he is old, lean, and of meagre economic means—as well as in a collective or social one—since he is an *hidalgo*, that is, a member of the Spanish impoverished nobility, the group that results from the social tensions latent in Chrétien's fiction, and that is torn by the conflict between its values and worldview, inherited from a glorious past, and its grim reality, the conflict imaginarily resolved by Chrétien. The quixotic figure is the paradigm of disillusionment, of the disenchantment of reality, despite don Quixote's efforts, similar to those of romance writers, to enchant it. Paradoxically enough, the enchanters Don Quixote blames for the anti-romantic reality that frustrates his designs, are actually disenchanters.

(ii) On the other hand, the conflict between life and literature is also the conflict between the real and the ideal, and, in this sense, don Quixote is the hero whose idealism unfits him for this world and brings about his tragic downfall. In this view, the Don is a noble figure, committed to lost causes and old-fashioned values in a world given over to corruption, materialism, and fashion. This aspect of Quixotism is not a critique of literature, but of the world itself, of a society or culture incapable of comprehending or accommodating the spiritual and intellectual idealism of don Quixote. In this Romantic—with a capital R, since it originates among the German Romantics, as has been shown by Anthony Close—reading, don Quixote, despite his madness, is also a knight errant like those he imitates, but is separated from them by this chasm between the hero and the world around him. What makes him a unique figure in European literature is precisely this breaking of the romance harmony with society, his isolation, the fact that he is a hero radically alienated from his milieu as a result both of the impracticability of his ideals and the debasement of the real, of that milieu. The sense of his quest, of his fight, is different, since his fight is unsupported; he does not fight for society but against society. This is what attracted the Romantic imagination, which made of don Quixote a Romantic myth. His loneliness and alienation are thus a part of his essence as a hero, and in this sense he is the archetype of the modern hero. He is the first hero in literature who is embarked in a solitary crusade against the world, the system, and this crusade is solitary not only because he is alone, but also because of his inadequacy to the world. The word Quixote—at least in Spanish—still refers to the upright individual who hopelessly, and therefore fruitlessly, fights against his corrupted environment.

3. This description of the knight errant and the Quixote allows us to understand how they become patterns used by writers to give literary embodiment to contrasting attitudes towards a particular reality: the romantic hero articulates the sublimation of social and cultural codes and values in the hero's triumphant quest and social integration; the quixotic hero the questioning of those codes and standards through his alienation and failure—partial or total. The former legitimates a culture through the triumph of his idealized representative over the forces of evil, that is, the forces of otherness; the latter criticizes that culture and implicitly or explicitly advocates its substitution by a new one in the hero's alienated and idealist crusade against its debasement and corruption. The generalization of these formulas and its use as literary patterns for the expression of cultural tensions or landslides is best observed in the English 18th century, one of the most fruitful ages of fiction. This is proved by its contribution to this heroic pattern with new developments of it and by its realization of new possibilities encoded in it. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) we find the submersion of the romantic pattern of wish-fulfillment and integration, in this case borrowed from the the 17th-century French heroic romances and its heroines, in the realistic mode of the novel, up to that moment the territory of Quixotes and rogues. Richardson creates a romantic heroine with a touch of the quixotic and therefore a heroic pattern which may be called neo-romantic. In Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) we find the quixotic response to this neo-romantic heroine in the figures of Joseph Andrews—(i) the Quixote as a critique of literature, in this case of Pamela—and of Parson Adams—(ii) the Quixote as a critique of the world. But I have discussed the romantic and quixotic dimension of these figures elsewhere, so I will focus on the continuities and discrepancies of later heroes, the 20th-century detectives, with regard to these heroic traditions. For the detective has a romantic as well as a quixotic variety: the first one is represented by English classical detective fiction in general and Sherlock Holmes in particular, the second by American hard-boiled detective fiction and, more specifically, by Chandler's Philip Marlowe.

4. (i) The detective created by Arthur Conan Doyle at the very end of the 19th century is a new offspring of the old wish-fulfillment dream which generated the knight errant, although in social rather than individual terms: he satisfies the reader's desires in collective rather than in personal terms. Of course he has some attributes which are highly valued by the culture in which he originates, such as his intelligence, his power of ratiocination, his scientific knowledge and approach to the

world, but, as an individual, he is more likely to produce admiration than identification, he is admirable rather than attractive, or, in other words, we admire his mind rather than his body. On a social level, however, he dramatizes through his ability to use all these attributes for the solving of the most intricate cases, the desire of society for order, protection from menacing violence, evil, and chaos, and thus functions as a narcotic for all the fears and apprehensions generated by crime in a society increasingly regulated by law. (In this context it is easy to understand why Chesterton in «A Defence of Detective Stories» calls detective fiction the romance of the police force and compares police management to a successful knight-errancy.) Therefore the detective, like the heroes of Chrétien de Troyes, fulfils the expectations of a certain group of readers by embodying a fantasy—the fantasy that crime never pays, that criminals are always found out by rational means—that improves upon a reality which threatens the worldview and values—law, order, tradition—of the group he represents.

(ii) This group of readers is naturally the establishment and its silent army of well-thinking and well-acting citizens. The detective appears again accepting the challenge launched to this group by a criminal mind as a personal challenge to his own mind, but in so doing and in meeting it he plays something of the messianic or redemptive role of the knight errant: in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), for example, he protects aristocrats from criminal usurpers of their rights (or rather privileges); but he also defends the rights of more humble people who go to him for help or even saves maidens in distress from the machinations of certain villains, as in «The Boscombe Valley Mystery» or «The Speckled Band» (1892), for instance. In these works the romantic pattern is best observed: the combat between detective hero and villain—always intellectual, a contest of minds, rather than physical—over a frightened heroine mirrors the typical Gothic triangle (hero-heroine-villain), often in a Gothic background (the old house, the terror machinery, even glimpses of the supernatural which are of course conveniently explained away at the end). The detective's defense of the system when this is under threat makes clear his integration with it, even though on strictly personal grounds Holmes retains a certain marginality which results from a combination of his eccentricity, his sentiment of elite, and an obscure side of his personality inherited from Poe's Dupin. In this sense he is not a genuine representative of the group whose interests he represents.

5. Holmes and many detectives after him thus belong to the knight errant tradition, but in detective fiction there are also knights errant in a

quixotic sense, that is, in the very specific and limited sense Don Quixote is a knight errant: the American hard-boiled detective. (ii) His most quixotic trait is the fact that he is a hero removed from society, he has no support from a world behind him, he is individualistic and solitary. Society turns its back on him, he must fight alone, and, in this sense, although initially he fights for the system, eventually he must fight against it. This is the case of the heroes created by Raymond Chandler in the 30's and the 40's, and of Philip Marlowe in particular. Their quixotic aspect is obvious in Chandler's own description of them at the end of «The Simple Art of Murder». After presenting the world where they move as one of generalized and extended corruption, he presents his detective as a modern knight errant. «But down these means streets a man must go who is not himself mean», he writes at a certain point and thus highlights the quixotic contrast between the idealistic individual and the corrupted world. At the beginning of *The Big Sleep* (1939) Marlowe watches attentively a stained-glass panel showing a knight in armour rescuing a lady and feels like climbing up and helping him; but, unlike this painted knight errant, the maid in distress Marlowe is always ready to help frequently turns out to be the killer. Marlowe does not fight evil criminals, but rather the establishment they supposedly—actually no longer—threaten, as represented by policemen, mayors, judges, politicians, gentlemen and dames of high society, even his own clients. Out of this strife a picture of a corrupted and criminal society emerges. The hero is used to criticize that society rather than to protect it from the threat of crime: society is the real threat for the upright individual. (i) But the quixotic pattern implies a critique of literature as well as of the world. The quixotic hero is a critique of the romantic hero and his falsification of reality, he is an instrument for the disenchantment of reality. Marlowe is not made ridiculous to discredit the literature which is the source of this trait, like Don Quixote, but he is an obvious response to classical detectives like Holmes or Philo Vance, and Chandler makes the point once and again in the essay mentioned above and in his novels. Marlowe is not extraordinary in intelligence or strength, is frequently beaten up, and has a dubious taste for women. He is a common man, although, like don Quixote, the debasement of the world makes his honesty and persistence in the pursuit of truth extraordinary and heroic.

(iii) And yet, despite this disenchantment of reality, Marlowe represents also a wish-fulfilment dream: he is a Quixote who fights the system and, unlike the Don, he wins. He succeeds in his search for truth and sometimes for justice, even though his success is limited because it does not bring about the redemption of and his integration with society:

its corruption and his alienation will continue. He embodies thus the very American dream that the idealistic individual can defeat the system and triumph over its corruption. This originates a very interesting paradox, since Chandler's works become a criticism or disenchantment of reality as well as an enchantment of it; the Quixote figure becomes a wish-fulfilment dream which fills in the void left by the disappearance of romantic heroes in an anti-romantic reality, in a hostile society. If Pamela represents the submersion of the romantic in the realistic, which implies the depiction of the romantic heroine as quixotic, and in this sense she is neo-romantic, Marlowe represents the submersion of the realistic in the romantic, which implies the use of the quixotic hero for romantic wish-fulfilment, a transformation of the pattern that could be called neo-quixotic. (Both of them show the attraction of the romantic towards the quixotic when heroes or heroines have to cope with the real world; the depiction of reality imposes a transformation of the romantic heroic pattern towards the quixotic.) The core of some American popular heroes is, in fact, quixotic in this sense, neo-quixotic. The heroic dimension of Quixotism is thus preserved in the 20th century in non-obvious Quixotes. They are knights errant in the Arthurian sense, but rather they are so in the quixotic sense: solitary crusaders against power and a debased society.

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