Three Heroes you may Meet in History

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Introduction

Every narrative involves a cast of characters. Some, like Hamlet, will be center stage, and their actions and inactions will shape the tale. Others are peripheral, cast, and buffeted along with the actions of others, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who lurk in the margins of Hamlet's script and staging. History, too, is ultimately a narrative, and as such, it can easily switch to fiction—historical fiction—with its cast of semi-true characters. This genre will often present us with three types of heroes (not an exhaustive list) that you may meet in history: the Great Hero, the Genius Hero, and the Antihero.

Great Hero

An example of a Great Hero is Toyotomi Hideyoshi as featured in Eiji Yoshikawa's novel *Taiko* (1945). Hideyoshi's remarkably humble beginnings and vertiginous rise make him an archetypical Great Hero. He is a man who overcame the worst adversities, including being born into the social margins, the worst adversity of them all. The novel chronicles the hardships and crushing failures of young Hideyoshi's life. His household is poor, and every work or apprenticeship he attempts proves him to be useless. However, the destiny of history grabs him when he joins the ranks of Oda Nobunaga's army, and through his own inner will and strengths, faces each new challenge with bravery and cunning until he sits astride the pinnacle of Japanese power. The archetypical nature of Hideyoshi's arc makes him an attractive figure for us and perhaps even a figure of fantasy. We too, most of us, face failures and setbacks. Yet, we continue with the vague hope that everything could suddenly change for us one day. There is always a chance that something unexpected could happen in our career, lifestyle, or situation, and suddenly, we will soar from the margins and onto center stage to bask in the glory of our times, to stand and smugly stare at all those who thought we were losers. If it could happen to somebody born in a lowly hovel, like

Hideyoshi, it could happen to any of us.

The case of Hideyoshi, however, is also a reminder of how there are, in fact, no pure heroes in history, and fantasies, on the contrary, are the stuff of dangerous demagogic delusions. As anyone familiar with Japanese history will know, Hideyoshi did not actually end up as that great a great hero. He was a paranoiac purger with fiercely cruel urges; a megalomaniac tyrant who launched a horrific war against the innocent nation of Korea. We admire him, applaud him, and urge him on when he is the youthful poor innocent loser trying to make it in the world, but we detest him, condemn him, and wish him no good when he is the monstrous murderer of later years. Although this is contradictory, real history is a cemetery of character consistency.

It is perhaps the impossibility of finding heroes who remain consistently great that distinguishes real history from historical fiction. Indeed, it is when the telling of history is at its worst–when it is a regurgitator of propaganda and bias–that it begins to approximate the Great Hero model of historical fiction. It appeals to a certain longing within the reader but remains essentially untrue.

Genius Hero

The Genius Hero is a fantasy different from the Great Hero because the Genius Hero is born a hero, born endowed with the special skills and traits that make him heroic. In this narrative, history is presented in all its messiness, a tale of woe and despair. However, then appears the Genius Hero, whose mere arrival will already make everything start to be alright. We can only look in wonder and excitement at how this hero will crush problems that are beyond our power to resolve. Perhaps when we were younger, much younger, as in our early childhood, we would have liked to have become Genius Heroes ourselves, but most of us grew out of this superhero fantasy. Unlike the struggling and challenged Great Hero, we tend not to want to see ourselves too much in the Genius Hero. It is their superheroness and their difference from us that is the attraction. Too much similarity to our own normalness and imperfections quickly dashes their allure. (This is similar to the dissatisfaction we feel when, upon reading a detective novel, we can guess the ending and outcome too early in the story. It does not make you feel clever, but rather stupid for wasting your time reading a novel that was

not clever enough for you). The Genius Hero of historical fiction is similar to the psychotherapist of Lacanian psychoanalysis. He is the "*sujet supposé savoir*" (Žižek 1992:49), someone whose mere presence means that the narrative is already converted into a solvable puzzle. Where once there was madness and disaster, now there is stratagem and calm analysis.

Let us look at the Genius Hero, Yamamoto Kansuke, in the novel *Samurai Banner of Furin Kazan* by Inoue Yasushi. This is the story of a master strategist who manages, through Machiavellian guile, to rise through the ranks of Takeda Shingen's court. He is presented in the novel as someone with an almost omniscient power regarding matters of warfare and politics. The joy of this character for the reader is to see the cleverest mind at work, playing the multi-dimensional shogi that was the power games of the Warring States period. His mind calculates coldly and correctly, similar to the whir of a supercomputer. However, if the Genius Heroes of history, such as Kansuke, are akin to supercomputers, how can they truly be heroes for us? My calculator can solve the most complicated arithmetic problem in a Genius Hero fashion, and yet I do not idolize it or empathize with it. That is why the machine-like Genius Hero, to win our human empathy, must have one fault, one flaw, and one desire that mushes rational circuitry. To understand this, let us examine the concept of rationality, and to help us do this, let us borrow Max Weber's distinction between two types: *zweckrational* and *wertrational* (Aron 1970:186). *Zweckrational* is the rationality one follows when there is a clear rational goal in mind. For example, if we want to capture a castle, we will take such and such actions towards that end. In Kansuke's case, his rational goal is the military success of his lord Takeda Shingen, as being part of Takeda's retinue means that Takeda's success would be Kansuke's success. Motivated by this *zweckrational*-like approach, Kansuke operates like a supercomputer, is able to survey a situation, analyze the data, and propose formulas for success. He achieves this from the smallest projects (who to assassinate) to the largest (where to build a castle).

However, unlike a supercomputer, Kansuke has one flaw: his love for Princess Yuu. It is in this emotional affection for her that we see the operation of *wertrational*, rational action aimed at a non-rational goal. Kansuke will employ every rational means to protect this woman he loves,

regardless of the consequences, ethical, or otherwise. The end in itself is not rational. It is an emotional end that has no material benefit for Kansuke, who at no point seeks to make his love for Princess Yuu carnal. Indeed, Kansuke's celibate status helps sustain the archetype of the Genius Hero, for nothing could dampen the powers of a Genius Hero, or any other type of superhero, than the domestic banality of daily family life. This unrequited, unspoken, and unconsummated love for Princess Yuu propels Kansuke into *wertrational* behavior, ultimately driving him to sacrifice all to sustain the world of Takeda and Princess Yuu, an act of passionate self-destruction that a supercomputer (with all terabytes in the world) could never probably achieve. Non-rational self-destruction requires super and ingenious human effort.

Antihero

The last type of hero discussed here is the antihero. Such a hero must not be confused with the villains of history, such as Hideyoshi (for the Koreans) or Elizabeth I (for the Irish). An antihero is one who wanted to be a hero, but history was too much for them. An antihero fails the expectations that history sets him. Let us take the case of Tokugawa Yoshinobu, the Last Shogun, as featured in the novel *The Last Shogun* by Shiba Ryōtarō. During his time, he was expected to be a salvational *sujet supposé savoir* for Bakumatsu Japan. Let us recount the trauma Japan faced in the 1850s. Let us imagine Edo Japan as an individual person; let us say, a woman attending a therapy session to cope with her traumas. What are her problems? First, her personality, as in ego, lacks an integrated center. She is fragmented between the voice of the Emperor, the Shogun, and all the individual daimyo barons that speak for her inside of her. Next, her libidinal economy, which is an utter rice fetish, drives her constantly towards self-destructive Great Reforms that stunts her maturation into someone who can open up to the financial flows of mercantile and monetary fluidity. These insecurities and fragmentations drive her sakoku-style hikikomori syndrome.

Then, the foreign barbarian devils of her nightmares arrive. Oh, the trauma! However, meeting westerners, while traumatic, does not alone explain the nervous breakdown that is the Bakumatsu period. The foreigners coming is not the cause of the breakdown; it is one more trauma but it is

the trauma in which all the other traumas can be wrapped up and neatly packaged. It is, in Lacanian parlance, *le point de capiton*, a conscious focus point for all the other traumas. (Apparently, according to Slavoj Žižek in the documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, the shark plays the same role in the movie *Jaws*.) When we stand on the beaches and cry "*sonno joi!*" (Hail the Emperor! Expel the barbarians!) at the sharks that swirl around our sacred isles, we are acting out our hysteria as the traumas well up and overwhelm us. However, as Bakumatsu Japan lies on the therapist couch, she does have one possible salvation, and this is her therapist, the savior *sujet supposé savoir*: Yoshinobu Tokugawa, with whom she falls in love ("transference," I believe is the term).

However, the problem with a *sujet supposé savoir* is that it is a fantasy that projects superheroness onto a human subject who was not born a savior but simply bequeathed the role due to random circumstances. This is the case with Yoshinobu Tokugawa, around whom factions utterly opposed to each other rally. For some he is the man to rid Japan of the foreigner barbarians; for others, he is the one to drag Japan into the modern world's family of nations. For a while he is able to sustain the doublethink by listening to all and keeping silent (like any good therapist). However, the reality of a divided Japan cannot be repressed forever. There is a showdown between the old Tokugawa regime and the new modernizers, two factions that had, at one time, believed Yoshinobu to be their champion. Yoshinobu copes with this conflict in classic antihero style. He runs away. In contrast to the Great Hero, the Anti-Hero starts off greatly, but retreats to weakness. However, of the three heroes surveyed here, Yoshinobu is the most human. He begins his life with the energy and ambition of youth, only to meet bitter failure and disappointment, but ends up quiet, wise in his later years, and seemingly serene. This is soothing because it is not a fantasy. Perhaps most lives follow a similar trail.

Conclusion

They say that history is just one damn thing after another. History just happens in the same way that rain just falls and the sun just rises. It is the human mind that reads back over events and judges the villainy and heroics of the tale. As Hamlet says, "for there is nothing either good or bad but

thinking makes it so." (Hamlet, Act ２, Scene ２). We, the later generations, the readers of history's narratives, the ones who know what happened at the end, are those who get to separate the great from the marginal, the bad from the good, and the noble from the weak. As Hamlet dies, he becomes aware that he will no longer have control over the story of his deeds. He pleads with Horatio, "Horatio, I am dead. Thou livest; report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied." He knows that his acts will have more than one telling, more than one version. Horatio must actively fight, though it be arduous, to ensure that Hamlet's heroic narrative remains dominant.

> Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.
> [Hamlet, Act ５, Scene ２]

Was Hamlet fortunate to have been in the center stage, in that space upon which heroes strut awhile, and to have his name live, though that name may well end up being sullied and scorned? Or, is there comfort in being unknown to history and, hence, to history's cruel and always unfairly inaccurate character judgements? For us, marginals, our epitaph will always be mercifully fleeting:

> Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.
> [Hamlet, Act ５, Scene ２]

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