

THE HERO AS ASSASSIN

Harold Feldman

“Insarov’s mother suddenly disappeared without leaving a trace; a week later she was found murdered. There were *rumors* she had been outraged and murdered by a Turkish aga. . . . And do you know with what aim he is studying? He has a single idea: the liberation of his country.”

Turgenev: *On the Eve*.

I.

The idealistic assassin presents several problems of great interest to a psychoanalytical anthropologist. A study of these creatures both contradicts and helps to explain several very common beliefs. For instance:

(a) This kind of murder was not developed in primitive societies but in rather highly civilized states. Assassination is extremely rare among savages and barbarians. The idealist assassin first appears in history in Greece and the classic model of the type is among the killers of Julius Caesar. Doing away with one’s rulers is actually a more common practice in Germany and the United States than in Spain and many South American countries, that is, when the motives for the act are lofty and abstract.

Here of course several distinctions must be made. When we talk of those Latin-American presidents who first run for office and then for their lives, we are usually referring to military and conspiratorial coups d’etat. Our subject also does not include the dolophonias of Japan, the Moslem countries, and the Balkans, where such murders are virtually semi-official acts carried out under the guidance of cabinet ministries, military factions, or a priestly caste. Even here, though, we must note that the practice of assassination takes a regular form only when the country has been reorganized on civilized lines. When the Father-Ruler of tradition is replaced by the authority

of territorial law, the path is cleared for a more violent expression of hostility to the Father-Governor.

We must also separate our assassins from the more primitive Heroes of antiquity when killing one leader sometimes meant the automatic winning of a battle. Thus, Ehud slew the fat king of Moab and Judith decapitated Holofernes. They were doing a job in tribal wars and not killing their acknowledged rulers for a noble cause.

(b) The assassin is usually thought of as a kind of populist libertarian but the opposite is more often the case. Gumbel, in his *Vier Jahre politischer Mord* (Berlin 1922), showed that monarchists, nationalists, and fascisti carried out more than fifteen times as many assassinations in the four years after the end of World War I than did socialists, democrats, or anarchists. The idealist assassin is a reactionary even when he appears like a self-sacrificing rebel, despite the ecstatic remark of Swinburne:

“Freedom hath none but one red star—tyrannicide!”

(c) Probably no class of people more consciously, earnestly hope for and expect the status of Hero than do the idealist assassins. Yet extremely few really make the grade in history or myth. And of the few who do, a small group turns out to be altogether unhistorical myth creations.

That is the problem from the sociological standpoint. From the standpoint of individual psychology, another striking set of facts must be accounted for: (a) The assassins are all of youthful age, usually in their late twenties or early thirties. (b) They do not really expect to eliminate any great evil by their deeds. They chiefly want to fill the authorities with fear.¹ Above all, they have no hope of replacing the powers they kill.

None but Caesar could overthrow a Rome.

The most that Brutus did was make him fear.

(Schiller. *Die Ræuber*, interlude to Act IV, 5.)

(c) They expect all their glory from a single action, for which they expect in turn to be killed. (4) The cause they kill for is rarely their own. Brutus was not a republican. Felton was not a parliamentary Roundhead. Alexander Berkman was not a steel worker. The Czar-killers of 1881 were not peasants. Booth was not a Southerner. Ravailac was a rejected Catholic. They are the outsiders who appear to act on behalf of a defenseless mass or in the name of an abstract country. We saw recently that the most violent self-sacrificers for Puerto Rican independence (a cause never supported by the people

of Puerto Rico) were persons who work in the United States and show little inclination to return to the "motherland."

It is a pity that Edmund Bergler has not undertaken a study of these people. They are choice specimens of the pseudo-aggression for which he has such a keen and practiced eye. However he would probably tend to undervalue the role of the Oedipus Complex in the assassin's personality, a factor to which we must ascribe a major importance.

Let us see what conclusions may be drawn from a brief survey of the outstanding examples of the genus.

II.

"My talisman all tyrants hates
And strikes them to the ground."

Schiller: *Man's Dignity*

*Harmodius and Aristogiton.*²

The first Heroes of tyrannicide appear to have been two Athenian youths, Harmodius and Aristogiton. They were nobles and deeply devoted to each other *a la mode grecque*. In their time the government of Athens was a "tyranny"—the title of the governor was "Tyrant" although his rule was far from being oppressive or harsh. The Tyrant Hippias had a brother named Hipparchus who was in love with Harmodius but his proffers of love were rejected. Stung with jealousy, he insulted the sister of Harmodius in public and, in revenge, the two lovers killed Hipparchus on the festival day of Panathenaea. Shortly thereafter Harmodius and Aristogiton were themselves killed.

Now *four years later* in 510 B.C., Hippias was expelled from Athens by an uprising of certain classes. From that time on, Harmodius and Aristogiton gained the reputation of patriots, deliverers of their people, and martyrs. To be related to their families was considered worthy of the highest honor and all their descendants were granted immunity from public burdens.

The first striking fact which history contributes to our study is that this new type of hero-worship began during the constitution of the first political society of all times. During that period, the Athenians ceased to be organized by the ties of kinship and founded a government based on territorial divisions. The tyranny (which, as a matter of fact, was quite democratic) no longer rested directly on the patriarchal principle. The ruler of the state was no longer the elder of the tribes but an executive of class interests, just as the god

of the state was no longer the common ancestor but a spirit of property in his mask. They could therefore be attacked and overthrown as the real Father and Father-surrogate could not be. Furthermore, it was desirable that any attack on the new leaders be made in the name of that ancient society which had disappeared and could never be revived. That is why we see the emphasis on tyrannicide as a vengeance of family honor. Hence the special privileges granted to all those related by blood to the Heroes.

We also see that a tyrant need not be a tyrant and the tyrannicide need not kill the tyrant himself in order for both of them to live in tradition as such. The Hero need not do anything to uphold principles or ideals. The liberation he is given credit for need not have occurred in his lifetime. His motives for action may be purely personal. In fact, the apparent motives in the case of Harmodius and Aristogiton (the defense of a female relative and the affirmation of homosexual love) are of a kind we shall meet with again and again in our idealistic assassins.

Still, we must not forget that it was only during a political change in which the heroes had no part that the people of Athens discovered them as their liberators. The Hero does not have to act in the social crisis but without a social crisis, there will be no Hero. In politics, political motives rarely satisfy the majority. Most people are not paranoid enough for that. Besides, people inwardly carry over some awe for the institutions they destroy and afterwards feel guilt for their action. They salve their consciences with the idea of the Hero. The enemy was not ruined for political aims and interests but because he violated the blood code of family honor. The rape of a cottager's daughter is said to have begun the English Peasants War. The ten year Trojan War began, they say, when Helen eloped with Paris.

The thought of a Hero also contains this consolation: the blood of the tyrant is not on the heads of those who benefited by his demise. The Hero killed the tyrant. There was never a more self-effacing maker of history than the common people. But it effaces itself not from modesty but from guilt. The Hero assassin is an alibi in human form.

*Brutus.*³

Brutus is the one whom people usually choose to symbolize the principle of republican liberty as opposed to authoritarian oppression. Those who study the real history of the Roman Civil Wars however soon discover that his life was far from consistent in such matters. When Pompey fought Caesar, he took Pompey's side, but Pompey's

party was largely composed of landowners and usurers. When Pompey lost out, Brutus was one of the first to desert him and win a pardon from Caesar. From then on he was one of Caesar's favorites and there was no sign of any dissension on policy or principles until the assassination.

Even if we accept the plot of Caesar's enemies as a libertarian one, which is very questionable, there were several others more straightforwardly anti-Caesar than Brutus was. Cicero and even Cassius represented their avowed purposes better. But the popular imagination, when it is weaving a legend and dubbing a Hero, pays little attention to historical suggestions. Public opinion seems to have other things in mind than principles when it sets Heroes up to represent it. What about Brutus appealed to the myth making masses?

His name Brutus brought tyrannicidal associations. The Roman Republic was founded by a Brutus who drove out the royal family of Tarquin and killed his own sons in the process. In 1849 a jackass became president of France and later Emperor because his name was Napoleon.

Brutus was separated at an early age from his parents. His father died before he was nine and his mother, who had quite an amorous reputation, turned him over to be educated by his uncle. The boy was rumored to be a son of Caesar, so that the murder took on something of a revenge for a mother's shame. (Compare Hamlet). People were thus able to glorify an act which they otherwise condemned with horror, parricide. In Schiller's *Die Ræuber*, the poet has Caesar say to Brutus:

Son! It was thy father! Son, the world
 Would have been thy heritage!
 Go, the Romans call you immortal
 For you pierced your father's breast.

The absence of clear principle in our man may have been an advantage for his apotheosis. Imagination can make his motives whatever it pleases. Brutus became a symbol for the Tory reaction to Cromwell and for our Whig revolution of 1776. Is it not often a disadvantage for a presidential candidate to be identified with any specific issue? A mediocrity is preferred to whom everyone can find some reason to submit, for whom everyone can invent motives, and whom everyone may reject on the suitable occasion.

Brutus committed suicide rather than be captured by his enemies. Suicide, as a victory of pseudo-aggression over total frustration, awakens a general feeling of sympathy or admiration. The suicide shares the substance of the Hero.

The homo-erotic element has been unconsciously emphasized in all the literary treatments of Brutus. It was reserved for Nietzsche to give this more direct expression. In *Joyful Wisdom*, he writes, "And was it really political freedom that impelled the poet to sympathy with Brutus and made him his accomplice? Or was political freedom merely a symbol for something inexpressible," that autarchy of the soul to which he was able "to sacrifice his dearest friend, though he was also the grandest of men, the ornament of the world, the genius without peer." The other authors say that Brutus killed Caesar in spite of his love for him. No, says Nietzsche, he killed him because he loved him. For the importance of this theme in all the characters we here examine, let us especially bear in mind the two factors which first become prominent in Brutus' case: the early separation from a scorned father; the longing for an alienated mother.

Now we come to another problem. Brutus is almost unique in his position of a universal Hero tyrannicide. Only Charlotte Corday's reputation remotely approaches his in this regard. Why is it that most authority killers do not attain the rank of Hero? Let us examine some of these failures.

*Damiens,⁴ *Felton,⁵ *Ravaillac.⁶***

The actions which Brutus and the Greek lovers symbolized were attempts to restore a social condition which had been irrevocably superseded by new classes and new institutions. Even when such actions succeeded, the good old times could not be revived, and Shakespeare gave this pointed expression when he had the mob applaud the republican assassins with the cry, "Brutus shall be king!"

What about those assassinations which are, in a sense, harbingers of future developments? In England in the 17th century and France in the 18th, a king was beheaded, *not assassinated*. Charles I and Louis XVI were killed after due process of law, however irregular it may have been, and after enormous numbers of people had taken government into their own hands. In both governments, no single Great Man or Hero represented the change, not until the kings had been eliminated by will of the people's representatives. Then a Cromwell was found to be necessary in England and a Robespierre, then Napoleon, in France. Can it be then that the assassin is made a Hero by romanticizing dead things which people could not revive even if they wanted to? The Hero takes no responsibility for real historic changes. It is the Great Man who takes on such responsibility and only after the people cannot bear it any longer. When really great and permanent world-historic changes are afoot, the characters who would become Heroes at other times are only sentimental curiosities.

Several years before the Puritan Revolution in England, the king's prime minister, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, was assassinated. A month before, one of his coterie, a Dr. Lambe (known as "the duke's devil" for his practice of magic and black arts) was torn to pieces by a mob in London. Dr. Lambe was eighty years old at the time, and members of the mob were heard to say that they would mince his flesh and have everyone a bit of him. The Duke himself had won fame for his sexual profligacy and political intrigue, and so was a perfect scapegoat for King Charles I. His murderer was a Protestant, but the fact that the duke was the lover of the Queen of France and was, at the same time, preparing to raise the siege of La Rochelle against the French king, gave credence to the rumor that his murder was a French Catholic plot. Dumas has romanticized the episode in *The Three Musketeers*.

Why Felton killed the duke is still not clear. He was a melancholy, shy character. An officer of the Duke's, he was one of some thousand who had not been paid for some time and had been denied promotion. The only incident known of his previous history which indicated his future was when he challenged someone to a duel. He cut off a piece of his own finger and enclosed it with his challenge in order to convince his opponent that he was in deadly earnest. He got the idea of killing the duke, he said, after reading the Parliament's remonstrance to the king against his minister. To kill the duke, he then thought, would be doing his country a service. In his trunk were also found some theological propositions, the first of which read: "There is no alliance nearer to anyone than his country."

After the murder he did not try to escape. "The passage of Felton to London after the assassination," says Isaac D'Israeli, "seemed a triumph. Now pitied and now blessed, mothers held up their children to behold the savior of the country; and an old woman exclaimed . . . 'God bless thee, little David!'" The assassin was hailed by evangelists and republican fanatics as God's instrument. Odes were written to him, toasts were drunk in his honor, and he was promised everlasting fame as another Brutus.

At the very time he was being so exalted and praised, Felton himself was seized with remorse for his act and became despondent. He insisted on begging pardon of the duke's mother, the duchess, and even of the duke's scullion boy. In the open court, he stretched out his arm and asked that it should be cut off first because it was the offending tool. He died bravely under a barbarous execution.

Here a few new salient features deserve special attention. (1) His refusal to escape. (2) The prominence of the castration complex

—cutting a piece of his finger for the duel; his plea that his arm be cut off; the murder of a libertine aristocrat. (3) The alliance with the ideal country. Felton and other assassins measure all their manhood in single acts of violence. But the act really does not convince them of their own masculinity even when it is completed successfully. They collapse immediately afterward. Felton begs pardon of the duke's *mother*, he humiliates himself before a servant boy, and demands retaliatory punishment. This pricked the canonization bubble which would probably have disappeared anyway in the rising wave of revolt against Charles I. In 1649, for the first time, a king was tried and convicted by his own people and executed for high crimes and misdemeanors.

About a hundred years later there was an attempt on the life of the King of France, Louis XV. Once again the assassin's act has faded and been forgotten in a revolutionary deluge. But this attempt will bring out certain features which were only latent in Felton's homicide.

The assassin was Robert Francois Damiens, a poor domestic servant. His father had once been wealthy but lost his fortune during Robert's boyhood and ended up as porter in a prison. Damiens was very interested in the ecclesiastical debates of the day between Jansenists and Jesuits. His religious sense was particularly offended by the immorality of the court which he had occasion to observe as a servant of Madame de Pompadour's brother. *Several times he tried suicide*. He had married but, because of his wanderings and conditions of employment, hardly ever saw his wife (who was much older than he). Then he got the idea of making the assassination attempt. But not for real, he always insisted. He only wanted to *wound* the king and so bring him back to righteousness through fear. That he was telling the truth is borne out by the fact that he struck the king with the small blade of his pen-knife. The king did not even know he had been stabbed until he saw some blood on his clothing. Damiens could have made his escape easily but made no effort to do so. Even if he had, he would have been easily identified by the bright red breeches he chose to wear for the occasion. He remained immobile, was arrested, tortured horribly, and subjected to a long and excruciating execution, all of which he bore bravely and patiently.

Once again, the sexually profligate victim and the failure of the assassin to escape. In the case of Damiens, though, the assassin is apparently more interested in being martyred than in killing his enemy. His act seems to be a substitute for the suicides which had failed before.

One reason that might explain the failure of Felton and Damiens to win Hero status is that the men they attacked were not the real makers of the policies people hated but mere scapegoats, and profligate ne'er-do-wells in the bargain. However that will not suffice to explain why the murderer of France's Henry IV was not made a Hero. Henry IV resembled Julius Caesar in many respects but Ravailac never came near attaining the fame of Brutus.

Like Caesar's, Henry's rule marked the close of generations of civil wars. Like Caesar, he was able, broadminded, determined, efficient, and unprincipled. Henry is famous for his remark when he became a Catholic in order to win the allegiance of the capital city: *Paris vaut une messe*. In Henry's favor is the fact, however, that he had the most legitimate right to the throne of France. His reign brought peace to the ravaged kingdom and his liberal policies were bringing prosperity too, when his life was cut short by Ravailac. Henry's reputation for many love affairs and debauches also deserves mention as contributing to his murder by a purist youth.

Ravailac's father too experienced such financial ruin that he was unable to support his family. Throughout the boy's early years, the family lived on alms and was finally forced to break up. Ravailac became a valet, then a schoolteacher, but was always unable to hold a position. Then, from poverty and religious enthusiasm, he entered the monastic order of Feuillants but he soon disturbed his superiors by his frequent visions. He described one of them as follows:

He was meditating on his bed, his *hands joined*, his *feet crossed*, when suddenly he felt something on his face. It was *like a trumpet placed in his mouth*, and it made *warlike noises*.

In the various elements of this vision, we can see first of all a ceremonial defense against masturbation. The defense forces him into a position of helplessness however, so that the next element of the situation is a phantasy of breast suckling and fellatio. The warlike noises of the trumpet, I believe, express his pseudo-aggressive anal defense against an imminent collapse into homosexual orality.

As may be imagined, the good friars rejected Ravailac as did likewise the Jesuits in Paris to whom he next applied. The *rumor* that Henry IV was going to make war on the Pope made him resolve to kill the king, but the idea so terrified him that he decided to go to the king and confess his murderous intentions. In this vacillating state, he continued inactive until he once again made up his mind to assassinate Henry. This was just *after the coronation of the queen*. The murder was carried out and, in the ensuing confusion, he could have escaped unrecognized, but instead he stood immobile to be cap-

tured. Just before his execution he said, "I thought that people would be indebted to me for my act; I see that I was deceived."

Without any evidence that people would applaud his action, the assassin yet believes that his "country" is for him. This belief even seems to be engendered by the overwhelming force of the opposite. The assassin gives his ideal Mother one more chance to unite with him in rejoicing over the death of the Father. But the assassin himself is anxious to surrender and expects rejection even while he glories in his only and last demonstration of manliness. The true knowledge that dominates him is his alienation from his country, the conviction that his parents have deserted, ruined, and condemned him to emasculation and impotence. He must make at least one warlike noise with his trumpet and then die.

Note that our assassin failures were all of the lower classes. Perhaps the spirit of myth does not believe that a person with nothing to lose but his life can truly sacrifice himself.

*Charlotte Corday.*⁷

We now come to our most difficult and perhaps most enlightening example. Charlotte Corday immediately attained heroic stature by her murder of Jean Paul Marat, and the glamor surrounding her has scarcely faded with the years. In fact, it may very well be that she is the only real Hero-Assassin of all our candidates. In Harmodius and Aristogiton we found no ideals; the Brutus legend is utterly at contradiction with the known facts; William Tell is totally mythical; and the other cases we have reviewed were idealist-assassins who never reached Hero status. It may be that it took a woman and only a woman to represent, *in the true facts of her case*, the sublime manifestation of futile masculinity. When the great German critic, Franz Mehring, was told that Rosa Luxemburg was leading a tiny minority in opposition to World War I, he answered, "She is the only man in the Social-Democratic Party."

Let us first consider the victim. He was not a ruler of France nor a signer of death warrants. He was an extremely influential publicist who won enormous prestige and authority for his words because he was consistent and firm in the early crises of the French Revolution. A man of humanity and culture, he nevertheless showed an almost ruthless inflexibility in the course he advocated for the French people. Furthermore he was extremely popular with the poor of Paris and, in his private life, was far from scandal or profligacy. He was known by the name of his journal, *L'Ami du Peuple*. But in many provinces where people thought Paris had been overrun by dirty, ignorant, brutal mobs, he was considered as a bloody monster

and a foe to good government, society, and manners. Charlotte Corday was a provincial girl from Caen in Normandy.

She had been enthusiastic over the "beautiful revolution" in which enlightened noblemen embraced their tailors and feudal obligations were changed to moderate rents. But the Revolution had become crude and ugly. The facts of war and invasion had brought about the execution of the King and the beautiful Queen. Powdered heads began to fall, and the people, for whom everything was being done, especially the people of Paris, began doing the things for themselves. The poetry of 1789 became the angry, ungrammatical prose of 1793. It was natural that this should most offend the esthetic tastes of a well-bred, distraught woman who decided to restore the artistic balance by noble murder of the ugliest leaders of the mob.

We know very little of Charlotte's childhood. She lost her mother at the age of twelve and was sent to a convent while her father remarried. On leaving the convent she did not reenter her father's household but lived with an aunt instead. They were miserably poor although of petty-noble descent, and she would have been unable to make a good marriage even if she had been so inclined. A voracious reader, she was especially devoted to the tragedies of her grand-uncle, the great Corneille, in which love plays a very small part and heroism a very big one. Corneille is particularly famous for his "*femmes fortes*." The lonely, intelligent girl welcomed the enlightenment of the republic. The new ideas warmed her spirit which had grown cold from the habit of solitude, "never having known in reality nor tasted the sweetness of a home, its intimate pleasures, a mother's caresses, the calm joys of family life."⁸ When her favorite party, the liberal Girondins, were thrown out of power, she conceived the idea that to kill Marat would solve the chief problems of France.

This idea was reenforced when it became obvious that males could no longer save her France. On July 7, 1793, the Girondins issued a call at Caen for a march on Paris. Only thirty men appeared. To Charlotte this did not mean that people did not want to destroy the Jacobin regime. It only meant that it was time for a woman to show what a man could do, a woman twenty-four years old and rather pretty too. She left for Paris and wrote letters to Marat, asking for the great man's protection from persecution from the enemies of freedom.

Marat admitted her into the room where he had to remain covered in a hot bath because of a horrible skin disease. One witness reported that she saw "the young woman weeping and being com-

forced by citizen Marat." Charlotte's story only said that when he spoke of guillotining the enemies she named, she drove her dagger with great force into his chest and he died a few seconds later. A psychoanalytically trained person will certainly ask whether her weeping before Marat, her request for his protection, and then the final slaying, were not all reenactments of ambivalent fantasies about her own father. But this is only a conjecture, one which is indirectly supported, however, by what her biographer calls a fact which "would appear unbelievable if the very date of her letter did not confirm it."⁹ As soon as she was arrested and brought to prison, she wrote a letter to her father explaining her action.

She was surprised at Marat's popularity as shown by the mourning throughout the city when the news of his death spread. Equally astonishing to her was the calm behavior of the citizens whom she had expected to act like cannibal hordes. About Marat, she said, "What does it matter if he was humane to me if he was a monster to others!" (An alibi for hostility to the parent). At her trial, she saw a painter in the crowd and she began to pose for him. One of her preoccupations was to leave a portrait of herself behind, and the government granted her petition for a portrait painter. For a while it was in doubt whether she would be executed or committed as a lunatic.

It is remarkable that none of the many plays and poems written about Charlotte have been considered worthy of enduring. She is not another Joan of Arc although they have a few features in common. The poets set out to immortalize her act but, in the process, the affectation of this determined heroine became all too clear. In two great stories of world literature, women are involved in assassinations, but in neither do they carry out the deed themselves. Electra makes her brother act for her in the murder of her mother. In Macbeth, it is Lady Macbeth who conceives of the murder but is unable to carry it out because the aged king looks too much like her father. Terrible as they appear, they are nevertheless feminine creations. Perhaps that is why Euripides, who portrayed a series of ideal, self-sacrificing women (Alcestis, Polyxena, Andromache, Macaria, Iphigenia) was nevertheless called a misogynist.

In a letter from prison, Charlotte Corday described herself half-ironically as a "useless female who could do no good by going on living."¹⁰ It is this contempt for femininity and this envy of masculinity which finds such a clear expression in an idealistic assassination. In memory of Harmodius and Aristogiton, a bronze statue was set up in the Acropolis of a lioness without a tongue. Tradition explains

the choice of symbol by ascribing a mistress to Aristogiton named Leaena who was afraid she might betray the assassins and so bit off her tongue.¹¹ In the idealist assassination, the rebel without a cause (penis) momentarily finds one.

*John Wilkes Booth.*¹²

In the forty years after the end of the Civil War, three presidents of the United States were assassinated. McKinley and Garfield were not tyrants even to their killers. Elected by universal suffrage, they had little discretionary power and shared authority with several other governmental agencies. No one felt very oppressed by their personalities or liberated by their deaths. So Czolgosz and Guiteau could not even begin an apotheosis. The assassination of Lincoln however presents a very different story, and a special interest is aroused in his killer, John Wilkes Booth.

Booth certainly took his bid for heroism very seriously and he had a high qualification in that he was, at the same time, a first rate professional actor. What led this successful pet of a Northern liberal family to identify himself to such a fantastic extent with the fallen, ravaged South? He did not plan Lincoln's murder with any hope of reviving slavery but only as an act of retribution for the Northern victories and revenge for the impending freedom of the Negroes. His accomplices considered him a hero. The cry of "Sic semper tyrannis!", the jump from the balcony of a crowded theater, the narrow escape, the long search, the surrounding and burning of his hiding place in a Maryland barn near where he was born, the uncertainty surrounding his death—all were fitted for the great role he wanted to play. We are not sure whether a soldier shot him or whether he committed suicide. Many years later, several people claimed to be the real living John Wilkes Booth. The Greek philosopher Empedocles threw himself into the crater of Mount Etna so that people might account for his sudden disappearance by believing that he had ascended to the gods. But the volcano threw up one of his sandals and gave the game away. Booth had better luck.

His rise to Hero status however was arrested by several social factors. The South was not only utterly beaten but anxious for a reconciliation with the victors. Robert E. Lee, gently disbanding his men at Appomattox, appealed more to their tastes. The revenge element in the South found more proper expression in the outlaw ruffians of the Southwest border. Furthermore the man whom Booth killed was actually the hope of the South. Lincoln was resisting the Reconstruction radicals who wanted to uproot slavery altogether and

remodel the South as an area for small farmers, especially Negroes. Why did Booth kill Lincoln and not Thaddeus Stevens or Ben Wade? The hostile view of Lincoln as the "tyrannikle goriller" was giving way to an image of a merciful, conciliating father. The new Lincoln crystallized so quickly that Booth became a Judas before he could become a Brutus. Nevertheless the fashionable ladies of the French and British demi-monde wept and applauded the many plays abroad dedicated to Booth's memory.

John Wilkes Booth was the youngest son in a family of outstanding actors. His father was Junius Brutus Booth, known as the foremost tragedian of his day. Not only was his father a great actor but he was active in many liberal causes, an interest shown when he named his youngest boy after the famous English radical. When he died in 1852, his funeral in Cincinnati was attended by throngs of Negroes. Junius Brutus Booth was a Jew, although the family appears to have been liberal Christian and John Wilkes showed certain affinities to Catholicism. All his family opposed slavery and upheld the Northern cause except the youngest and favorite son.

A few events which are rather unimportant to the historian may be of decisive interest to a psychoanalyst. The year John Wilkes was born, his father became decidedly psychotic. From earliest infancy to his fourteenth year, the boy knew his father as a great, famous man who was a continual concern and embarrassment to the people who loved him. And John Wilkes was always his mother's pet. The father was extremely gentle; a confirmed vegetarian, he could not endure to see even the most noxious animals suffer. His youngest son was also known for his gentle kindness but, as a boy, he showed an unusual hatred of cats and exterminated all the cats on his father's farm. Another clue is the fact that the father had had a role specially written for him, the part of Pescara in Shielde's *The Apostate*. John Wilkes Booth's last performance on March 18, 1865, was in this same role at Ford's Theater. The father also wrote a very mediocre blank-verse tragedy called *Ugolino*, the father in Dante's poem who eats his own children in order to avoid starving to death. This same cannibalistic play was "piously produced by John Wilkes Booth at the Boston Museum in 1863."¹³ We should also take note that the assassin was involved in many love-affairs but was seriously attached in none of them. In May 1861 an actress stabbed him with a dagger and then stabbed herself almost fatally after a love quarrel.

Booth's first plan was to kidnap Lincoln to Richmond in the fall of 1864. It had never occurred to him to express his sympathies

in the war by volunteering as a soldier. He only dreamed of single actions on his own which would be dangerous and spectacular. When Lee surrendered and there were rumors that the Negroes were to be enfranchised, he decided on the assassination. His last reported words were "Tell mother—tell mother—I died for my country." Thus attacking the beliefs and standards of his father, mother, and brothers, he had acted for a moment in his father's name of Brutus.

III.

"A slight annoyance during the day will express itself in a dream as a wish for the offending person's death, or a breath of temptation may give the impetus to the portrayal in the dream of a criminal action."

Freud: *Group Psychology*.

What general conclusions may be drawn from these examples? Each expressed ambivalent emotions to his parents first of all by unstable sublimations in the areas of politics or religion. The fact that the assassin's politics and religion took such extraordinary form, however, indicates that the universal compulsion neurosis and the socially acceptable paranoid schizophrenia did not suffice to protect them against a more compelling internal complex of affects. In my opinion, the secret of the idealist assassin is an unconscious revulsion from the negative Oedipus Complex, behind which also hovers a fear of the loving mother who also condemns him to a lifetime of passivity. A hysterical monomania breaks through the cobwebs of sublimation and, in the process, assumes the sublimated form of an idealistic assassination.

The assassin retaliates against a fantasy of sexual aggression by the father. He frees himself for a glorious moment from the passivity to which he feels condemned by unconscious attachments to the mother. He stakes his whole claim to aggressive masculinity on a single pseudo-aggressive gesture. No sooner done, however, than he feels that the act is itself only a final castration in the death which returns him to the womb. A conspirator against the life of Queen Elizabeth in 1586, Chidioc Titchbourne,¹⁴ wrote a poem on the night before his execution, and the last stanza begins:

"I sought for death and found it in the wombe."

The same person also shows the decisive importance of homo-erotism in the assassin. He and a few others engaged in the plot only "for company," out of deep friendship for Anthony Babington, their

leader. "Friendship hath brought me to this," said Titchbourne under interrogation. Even though he had a wife, a child, and a sister to support, even though he "always thought it (the plot) impious and denied to be a dealer in it," the "regard of my friend caused me to be a man in whom the old proverb was verified: I was silent and so consented." Babington was a Catholic enthusiast for the romantic Mary, Queen of Scots, to whom he wrote love letters about the plot which were easily intercepted. To clinch matters, one of his letters contained a group portrait of all the conspirators.

Homo-erotism here is, of course, closely connected with the castration complex which is evident in all our examples. Schiller, the poet, envied assassins for their ability to rise beyond the passive, self-sufficient methods of literary "orality," and, in his *Dedication to Death*, called Damiens and Ravillac "my foolhardy cousins and colleagues," adding "'Tis a good thing for straight limbs!" That the assassin's goal is the penis of the father-rival is also suggested in his poem, *The Bad Monarchs*:

Let your towering shame be hid from sight
 In the garment of a sovereign's right . . .
 Tremble, though, before the voice of song:
 Through the purple, vengeance will ere long
 Strike down even a king!

The Hero wants to vindicate a disputed manhood.

Our study has shown that not all authority killers become Heroes, and that some Heroes never acted in the conflicts they commemorate in history. What tends to make a Hero is the conjuncture of two situations: (1) an indecisive social struggle, *une crise sans demain*, and (2) a personality or event which serves to romanticize, personalize, and sexualize the crisis in people's minds. William Tell killed Gessler because he almost killed his son. When Orsini tried to kill Napoleon III for the sake of Italian independence, a rumor went up that he was the lover of the Empress Eugenie.¹⁵ The primeval Heroes differ from those in civilized times chiefly in that the role of sexual motives (incest, parricide, perversion, etc.) are more conscious or obvious in the former. The Hero symbolizes the desire to return to a primitive situation in history, to an infantile state in the individual. The Hero turns social conflicts into family quarrels. Whereas the Great Man educates or leads entire communities, the Hero sets out to kill his dragon by himself. One might say that the Hero-Assassin is one who acts on the great-man theory of history, a theory which never deludes the Great Man for long.

FOOTNOTES

1 Whether assassinations are ever necessary is another question. Imagine a prison whose inmates, treated abominably, are absolutely denied any way of calling public attention to their fate. In such a case, some spectacular assault on the warden might be justifiable. However the psychological components of the act would remain the same in essentials.

2 See Smith's *Dictionary of Greek & Roman Biography & Mythology*, London 1890, II, 349-350. Also Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society*, N.Y., 1878, chapter 10.

3 Max Radin, *Brutus*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1939. Also H. Feldman, "Unconscious Envy in Brutus," *American Imago*, IX, No. 3.

4 Pierre Larousse, ed. *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siecle*, Paris 1869, VI, p. 47.

5 F. W. Fairholt, ed. *Poems & Songs Relating to George Villiers*, London 1850. Also Isaac D'Israeli, *Curiosities of Literature*, London 1867, pp. 312-317.

6 J. & J. Tharaud, *La Tragédie de Ravaillac*, Paris 1922. Also Larousse, *op. cit.*, XIII, pp. 734-735.

7 An impartial account in Larousse, *op. cit.*, V, pp. 113-115. Her cult is exemplified in J. Shearing, *The Angel of the Assassination*, Hamburg, 1935.

8 Larousse, V, 112.

9 Larousse, V, 114.

10 J. M. Thompson, *French Revolution*, N.Y., 1951, p. 368.

11 Mitchell Carroll, *Greek Women*, Phila., 1908, p. 188.

12 *Dictionary of American Biography*, N.Y., 1929, II, pp. 448-454.

13 *Ibid.*, 454.

14 D'Israeli, *op. cit.*, 239-241.

15 Rita Wellman, *Eugénie*, N.Y., 1941, p. 81.