Aspects of the Masculine: Heroics and Beyond in *The Thin Red Line*

> He was fine a young man. The first day he was born
> The mountains of Thrace bent down to show
> The wheat rejoicing on the land's shoulders.
> The mountains of Thrace bent down to spit.
> First on his head, then on his chest, then into his tears.
>
> (Odysseus Elytis. *Selected Poems.* New York, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 37)

By Christos J. Gianopoulos

It is a Greek custom for admiring relatives and close family friends to bless the newborn by spitting delicately into the air when the parents first introduce them. The spray is intended to land on the forehead and front torso of the child and the purpose of this blessing is to avert the attention of the "evil eye." More blessings follow as boys reach puberty and begin to act like men.

When I was a boy of seventeen, my mother, whose dominant psychological function was introverted feeling, came into my room and gave me a book. The title of the book was *Invictus: A History of Alexander The Great.* The author was a Greek American, Alexander James Cutrules, who was born in Sanford, Maine, my hometown. She gave me the book for a number of reasons. She was proud of the fact that a "Greek boy" was a published author. Secondly, she was communicating a message in an indirect way that my developmental path as a young male required a separation from her and from the security of home, and that I might learn something useful by reading about the life of the "big guy." I remember the encounter with her vividly because we were beginning to

repair our relationship after she had refused to grant me permission to date a beautiful redhead, a girl she considered too hot for me to handle.

I read the book with great pleasure, and I loved Alexander. But, the book also had an unsettling effect on me. It opened my eyes to the hero worship that the Greeks extend to the Macedonian king. Modern Greeks revere his memory so completely that when they mention his name, they speak of it in one breath, *Megalexandros,* just as a mother might roll off the end of her tongue a special name accorded to a cherished son or daughter. While I was inspired by the biography, I was also aware of the enormous challenge that any young man faces when he compares himself to a giant. Moreover, it confirmed in my inner mind the tendency on the part of the Greeks to admire Alexander excessively, partly as a reflection of their embarrassment over the historical decline of their cultural and political prominence.

I remember wondering what the real message of the book was for me. *Invictus?* A few years later, I met Rex Warner, a visiting Classics Scholar at Bowdoin, and he autographed his translation of a collection of poems by George Seferis, a Greek poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1963. I was still too young to grasp the meaning of Seferis's work, but certain stanzas would resonate with my introverted intuition. In one of his most famous poems, *Mythistorema* (George Seferis. *Poems.* Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1960, pp. 11–34), the protagonist does not want to lose the memory of the work that was begun, but never carried to completion. But going back to restore the Golden Age, where the Greeks were not only the pre-eminent scholars but also the rulers of most of the civilized world, is an impossible task. Individuals and nations pay a very high price for their grandiosity, and the attempt to recreate a bygone era that bears no correspondence to present day reality causes futile striving and needless suffering:

> Remember the baths where you were slain.
> I awoke with this marble head between my hands
> Which tires my elbows out. Where can I put it down?
> And others with wild faces looked for the Great-
> Alexander
> And glories sunken in the depths of Asia.
> (Seferis, p. 12)

Every young man must enter the world to make his mark and leave his personal mother behind. It is a call that a young man might not be too excited about heeding, not only because of the risk of facing danger out there in the real world, but also because of the need to break away from the enormous binding strength of the personal mother. For a boy, the personal mother is bearer of the very model of life, and her role as nurturer, teacher and caretaker is imprinted in the male psyche, only to be replicated over and over again through surrogates in the life-long experience of men. Men are raised by women, and the experience of the mother is psychologically determinative. The power of the feminine is immense in the psychic life of men, says James Hollis in his book *Under Saturn's Shadow,* and yet the psychological priority in the first half of life for a man is to free himself from attachment to the mother.

If you have ever witnessed the tension and strife between an adolescent son and his attentive mother, you have some understanding of how brutal the process of separating really is. The painful process continues within the psyche of the boy even after he has gone out on his own. Yet, young men hardly ever speak of the pain, preferring to bury the hurt under the mask of: "I couldn't wait to get out of that house." Men don't tell the emotional truth about how much disconnection hurts. As James Hollis says, "men collude in a conspiracy of silence" to suppress the shame they feel in acknowledging their needs and their losses. (James Hollis. *Under Saturn's Shadow.* Toronto, Inner City Books, 1994, p. 11)

Men don't tell the truth in public about what they feel. There may be very good political and economic reasons for the cover-up, but the image that men project of themselves hides a lot of pain, hurt, and unbridled psychic yearning for a closer connection with the real substance of life. Mother represents that place in the world or in the mind where men can relax, be themselves and not have to perform according to some external expectation and arbitrary standard. She also represents the feminine aspect of men, an animating quality that can inspire men to be creative, self-sacrificing and unbelievably daring. Near the beginning of the movie, *The Thin Red Line,* we meet Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), the real hero of the story, who is AWOL from his fighting unit. We hear his voice often in the narration: "Why can't we stay on the

heights, the heights we are capable of? We know the glory for a while and then fall back into separateness, strife and division."

Men are in contact with the life force within them when they encounter the archetypal world and their instinctual center. Jung called this energy current that rises up from the emotional center of a man's being, the anima. It is not a thing that one can see or touch, nor is it a particular form of knowledge. In its positive manifestation, it can best be described as a lift, an infusion of inspiration. The anima symbolizes a mode of relating and experiencing the world that is conditioned and influenced by relationships with outer women and by the culture. Private Witt has flown the coop, and he is living in paradise. We see him swim with the native children, and we watch him pay profound respect to the beauty of the Solomon Islands and its people, the Melanesians. As we wonder what made him leave his battle station, a Naval destroyer shows up with the smart-ass Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn) on board to yank Witt back into formation.

On the way back to Guadalcanal, Welsh tells Witt that he will be transferred to perform stretcher duty as punishment. Welsh is not able to see "the beautiful light," and he has reduced the complexity of living in the world to a one-word answer, "property." We see a hard-bitten, wounded man who is not able to admit to the emotional constraint that his cynicism has imposed on his own feeling function. His wound is not visible, but great damage has been done to his ability to relate. He is living proof of the second male secret, according to James Hollis, that men's lives are essentially governed by fear. Witt knows that you don't have to carry a rifle to be a hero, and he defiantly responds to the penalty by telling Welsh right to his face: "I can take anything you dish out; I am twice the man you are."

What does it mean to be a hero in today's world? This film by Terrence Malick points at the sun and the moon in a number of different directions to give us a look at various heroic profiles of men. The hero archetype exists within us all, both male and female, as a fundamental mobilizing force. Incarnating this archetype involves mustering the energy to confront fear, pain, lethargy, and the regressive attraction of the womb. For men, it means severing the maternal connec-

tion without losing the contact with a sacred space within, where human values and love of nature remain intact. It means leaving the world of women to earn a place of respect in the world of men. Because men must leave the personal mother and deactivate the mother complex, wounding is necessary.

What does it mean to say that one has a complex? It means, in Jung's earliest formulation, that when you hear or see a word that causes an emotional reaction within you, a disinterested, detached relationship with the associated idea is out of the question. A complex is a "feeling toned idea" that over the years accumulates around certain archetypes, for instance "mother" or "father." As Jung describes them, they are "disturbers of the peace," moving around autonomously to interfere with intention and disturb conscious performance.

> Complexes are in fact "splinter psyches." The etiology of their origin is frequently a so-called trauma, an emotional shock or some such thing, that splits off a bit of the psyche. Certainly one of the commonest causes is a moral conflict, which ultimately derives from the apparent impossibility of affirming the whole of one's nature." (C.G. Jung. *Collected Works, Vol. 8.* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 98)

To avoid the fate of turning into a Sergeant Welsh, a man must achieve a healthy separation from the bond with his personal mother, while at the same time maintaining an awareness of the importance of the archetypal mother. It requires an internal psychic struggle with the mother complex, and the battle for men cannot be won by selling out to pressure exerted by the patriarchal forces within the collective. In this movie, Lt. Colonel Gordon Tall (Nick Nolte) stands on the deck of a naval destroyer conversing with a much younger, one star General (John Travolta). They are wondering out loud about why the Japanese have built an airfield on Guadalcanal. Col. Tall knows that it is his job, as commander of a rifle battalion, to drive the enemy off the island.

Tall, a West Pointer, knows that the fate of his entire military career depends on a successful outcome. He has been passed over for promotion many times in the past, and he is much too old a man to remain in the Army as a light colonel after the War. The lieutenant colonel station in the Army is a dubious rank reserved for both bright young stars and has-

beens. The generals are watching, and if he does a good job, he will be admitted into the upper echelons of military leadership. Travolta congratulates Nolte for staying in uniform for as long as he has, and he asks: "How much do you want it, Colonel?" Nolte responds by saying, "As much as I have to, Sir." We know at that moment, that someone in the battalion is going to pay a very high price for making the Colonel look good.

The negative effect of a complex is experienced as a distortion in mental process. One or more psychological functions (thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition) are displaced, and the person suffers impairment either in perception or in coming to an appropriate rational decision. Col. Tall is in the grip of a "complex," and he is determined to get the job done his way. He remembers with great resentment being told what to do by younger superior officers, and he is not willing to continue to "eat untold buckets of shit." The battle plan calls for Company C to take the left side of a fortified hill with a full frontal assault. As the men of Company C prepare to disembark from the landing barges, we see Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) prepare his men for the fight. He has heard the fearful rumblings that Company C is going to get torn to shreds. The night before the battle, the Company Commander of Charlie Company prays to God under a full moon to give him the strength not to betray his men.

As the battle commences, Company C moves forward up the hill, but their progress is stalled by heavy machine gun fire and mortar barrages. We see man after man get picked off or blown up, and a staff sergeant goes crazy because he loses every single member of his squad. Captain Staros asks the Colonel for permission to outflank the enemy, but the Colonel demands obedience to the original battle plan. Company C continues to get clobbered, and Staros gets another call from the Colonel: "Staros, why aren't your men moving ahead?" Staros responds by saying that his men are pinned down, and he asks again for permission to outmaneuver the enemy.

In the grip of his power complex, the Colonel explodes and attempts to place the full force of his authority on Staros's head. Staros's face shows the pain, but he sticks to his guns and repeats his appeal. The Colonel rants and raves. Still, Staros musters up the gumption to say: "Sir, I must tell you

that I refuse to obey your order; I have my radio operator here as a witness, and I suggest that you alert yours to the import of this conversation."

The title of this film comes from an old Midwestern saying, "there is only a thin red line between the sane and the mad." Disgusted as he breaks off communication, Staros mutters to himself in Greek that the "old man" has lost it (his mind). Colonel Tall, in the midst of his mid-life misery, is unable to apprehend information that conflicts with his preconceived design, and it impossible for him to incorporate other considerations that relate to the welfare of the men. He is asked several times by both Staros and Captain Gaff (John Cusack) to supply the troops with water, but the Colonel does not want to think about anything or do anything to slow down the forward motion of his Battalion.

Tall's feeling function is out of commission, his sensation function shuts down, and his thinking function has to pragmatically carry the entire burden of arranging their rendezvous with destiny on time. The savage fight is over by sundown on the same day that the attack began.

Invictus, indeed! Even after the battle has been won, the Colonel is nervous and restless. His work is not done. He calls Staros into a bamboo enclosure, and he relieves the commander of Company C. Staros is told that he is "just too soft," and he will be reassigned to the Pentagon as a lawyer for reasons of ill health. The Colonel will see to it that he is awarded the Silver Star and the Purple Heart. Staros has been handed a left-handed promotion. This is the wound that every man who has stood up for something more important than success must endure. The unexpected decision is not something he sought or desired, and it was granted to ensure that nothing would ever be said about the confrontation in the field. He takes the news quietly, but he asks the Colonel before he leaves: "Have you ever had anyone die in your arms, Sir?"

For a man to mature fully and become a father in a symbolic sense, he must be willing to move beyond the role of the sanitized hero and buck the force of the system. Here is an example of how this might work. An experienced businessman, whose dominant psychological function is extroverted thinking, sits on the board of directors of a major

company. The company has recently completed a sale that has generated a big profit, but it has also raised huge questions about its future role in the business world.

The businessman owns a manufacturing business that has survived in a highly competitive industry, and he has learned the intricacies of financial analysis. At a board meeting of the company that completed the successful sale of some of its key assets, the financial managers proposed an unusual compensation plan. As with any policy board, the role of a Director is not to get too involved in internal management issues, unless there is good reason to question the soundness of a management decision.

When the businessman looked at the proposal he was concerned, but nobody else on the board voiced any doubt. He conferred privately with a fellow board member who expressed similar misgivings. However, his fellow board member admitted that he could be of little help in discovering the fly in the ointment, because he did not understand the numbers. Our hero was on his own. He has this dream:

> I am walking down a street, and I see a man standing on the corner with two big dogs on a leash. The dogs are Rottweilers, and they appear to me to be a threat to the welfare of a small dog that is standing off to the side a short distance away. I am very concerned that the little dog may get hurt, but the Rottweilers turn their attention towards me. They come closer to me, and when I turn to face them, they grow in size to the point where we are staring at each other eyeball to eyeball. The Rottweilers shrink in size, and I walk over to the man tending the dogs to see if I can identify him. I ask him: Who are you? The light in the man's face begins to change, as he becomes more recognizable. He answers by saying: Don't you recognize me? I am you.

The businessman is determined to find what he is looking for. He spends hours reviewing a pile of documents that stands three feet high in his office to locate a key memo. He finds it, and he sees the flaw in the financial managers' logic. He carries the memo into the next board meeting where a unanimous vote of approval is anticipated.

If you were to meet this man, you would know how much he prizes competence and forthright communication. Yet, his persona masks a certain sense of discomfort with feeling, and

you can tell that he thinks of feeling as nonlogical. His is not the personality type from whom you would expect a big emotional outburst in a business setting. But, his own sense of inner harmony has been disturbed by this financial proposal, and the dream reveals the potential injury to core values. The small dog is a symbol of introverted feeling, his inferior function, which is tied to the deepest part of his soul. The presentation of the man's shadow signals a readiness to meet the challenge. He stood his ground with the Rottweilers, and he not going to back down in the boardroom. When the proposal is presented for discussion, he bangs his fist on the table and starts swearing: "This is not fair, this is not right, I oppose the motion to approve this compensation scheme."

A shock is registered in the corporate psyche, and the weaknesses of the plan are exposed for all who are sitting around the table to see. The plan is shot down, and a few days after the vote, the businessman receives a letter of heartfelt appreciation from his ally on the board. It is a letter that he will cherish for the rest of his life. He will cherish it just as much as Staros will remember the acknowledgment he received from his men when they say good-bye. They tell him that he was a father to them because he stood up to the Colonel. He tells them in Greek, *"Isaste ta pallikaria mou . . .* You are my brave young men. You are my sons, my dear sons. You live inside me now."

I conclude with a poem of George Seferis:

> And for the soul
> If it is to know itself
> It is into a soul
> That it must look.
> The stranger and the enemy, we have seen him in the mirror.
> They were good lads, the comrades. They did not grumble
> Because of weariness or because of thirst or frost.
> They had the manner of trees and the manner of waves
> That accept the wind and the rain,
> Accept the night and the sun,
> And in the midst of change they do not change.
> They were the good lads.
> (Seferis, p. 13)