

Ideas Without Words.
Rereading *Right-Wing Culture*
Alberto Toscano

What are the cultural correlates of the planetary resurgence of a radical and revanchist Right? Or more pointedly, how and why is the current ecology of reaction primarily nourished by conflicts, nay «wars», that are framed as *cultural* – even when, as in the *leitmotiv* of a forgotten White working class, the superstructure is nothing but a fever-dream of the base? Many among us who have sought illumination regarding such questions have tried to recover from the archives of «classical» critical theory – spanning the 1920s to 1940s – concepts and methods with which to anatomise, diagnose and hopefully counter then-nascent fascisms and their democratic afterlives. The Institute for Social Research's studies on authority, the many essays published by Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann and others in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung / Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, the varied and often unpublished fruits of the Research Project on Anti-Semitism and the volumes of the *Studies in Prejudice Series*, especially *Prophets of Deceit* and *The Authoritarian Personality*, are all replete with critical models and materials that have not exhausted their cognitive force – something we can also say for Marcuse's and Angela Davis's later efforts to reformulate the fascist problematic in the Nixon era and beyond.

While I have drawn elsewhere on this tradition to map what I've called our «late fascism»¹, in this essay I want to home in on a little known but extremely fecund source for thinking the fates and futures of the radical Right, namely Furio Jesi's 1979 *Cultura di destra* (Right-wing Culture). Jesi's unique and protean work is only beginning to make inroads into Anglophone debates – I was lucky enough to be able to host three of his books in the Italian List I edit

¹ A. Toscano, *Notes on Late Fascism*, in «Historical Materialism», 2 April 2017, available at: <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism>; A. Toscano, *Late Fascism*, Verso, London 2023.

for Seagull Books, all of them edited or introduced by Andrea Cavalletti: *Spartakus*, his study of the symbology of the Spartacist revolt in the context of German literary history, unpublished in his lifetime; *Time and Festivity*, a collection of essays on literature and mythology ranging from a study of the politics and poetics of Rimbaud's *Bateau Ivre* to further confrontations with one of Jesi's key authors, Rilke; and *Secret Germany*, a landmark study of the conflicted lives of mythology in German letters, with particular attention to the circle around the poet Stefan George and the writings of Thomas Mann².

Jesi, who had begun his extremely precocious scholarly career in his teens as an Egyptologist and archaeologist, having dropped out of high school (his first book on tales and legends of ancient Rome, co-authored with his mother, was published when he was fifteen, his treatise on Egyptian pottery at 17), produced uniquely perceptive monograph studies of Rousseau, Brecht, Bachofen, Kierkegaard, as well as dozens of dense, playful and iconoclastic essays on topics ranging from the work of his one-time teacher, the Hungarian mythologist Karl Kerényi, to the writings of Elias Canetti and Ezra Pound. *Cultura di destra* was published a year before his death from an accidental gas-leak in his home, and in the midst of an extremely violent season – both physically and discursively – in Italian politics, which would culminate, a month and a half after Jesi's death, in the bombing of the train station in Bologna, a massacre imputed to far-Right terrorists, some of whom found inspiration in texts, such as those of Julius Evola or Giorgio Freda, touched upon in *Cultura*.

Not least among the reasons for turning to Jesi's book four decades on, in our own morbid conjuncture, has to do with the recombinant lives of an esoteric revolutionary-conservative Right in our metastasising media ecologies – a situation for which Jesi's observation about logorrheic habits of reactionary keepers of secret and elite knowledge hardly seems out of place: «most of the sages of modern esoterism [...] have spent their life proclaiming that their wisdom was inaccessible and incommunicable by words, while at the

² F. Jesi, *Spartakus*, introd. A. Cavalletti, trans. A. Toscano, Seagull Books, Calcutta and London 2014; F. Jesi, *Time and Festivity: Essays on Myth and Literature*, ed. A. Cavalletti, trans. C. Viti, Seagull Books, Calcutta and London, 2021; F. Jesi, *Secret Germany: Myth in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, introd. A. Cavalletti, trans. R. Braude, Seagull Books, Calcutta and London 2020.

same time being the most prolific of polygraphs». This does not simply entail the recovery and republishing of the likes of Evola, Spengler, and others, but the revival of right-wing culture more broadly, understood, as Jesi declared in a 1979 interview with the Italian weekly *L'Espresso*, as that «culture in which it is declared that there are values beyond debate, indicated by capitalised words, above all Tradition and Culture but also» – stressing the right-wing form of much self-described leftist culture – «Justice, Freedom, Revolution. A culture, in other words, made up of authority, mythological security about the norms of knowing, teaching, commanding and obeying». This culture is one in which «the past becomes a kind of processed mush [*pappa omogeneizzata*, baby food] that can be modelled and readied in the most useful way possible»³.

Jesi captured the production, hypostasis, and circulation of these powerfully vacant, capitalised signifiers in a formula drawn from Oswald Spengler's last book, *The Hour of Decision* (*Jahre der Entscheidung*), written before but published shortly after Hitler's rise to power. In the Preface to that book – which Jesi otherwise passes over but to which I'll return to by way of conclusion – Spengler wrote: «That which we have in our blood by inheritance – namely wordless ideas – is the only thing that gives permanence to our future» (*Was wir von unseren Vätern her im Blute haben, Ideen ohne Worte, ist allein das, was der Zukunft Beständigkeit verspricht*)⁴. Jesi contends that the men of culture of the radical and fascist Right «had at their disposal a genuine literary language suited to «ideas without words». This is not a language they had invented. It was a language created in the bosom of bourgeois culture, matured in the course of the relations with the past which that culture had configured, and ready for use»⁵. His thesis is concisely advanced in the following formulation:

³ F. Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, Garzanti, Roma 1979; new edition: *Cultura di destra. Con tre inediti e un'intervista*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, Nottetempo, Roma 2011, p. 287. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Italian are my own. For further illuminations of Jesi's devastating appraisal of right-wing culture, see E. Manera, Wu Ming 1 and G. Santoro, *Il più odiato dai fascisti. Conversazione su Furio Jesi*, «Giap», 15 January 2013, <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2013/01/il-piu-odiato-dai-fascisti-conversazione-su-furio-jesi/>; E. Manera, *Myth and Right-wing Culture in Furio Jesi*, in «Theory & Event», n. 22/4, 2019, pp. 1069-81; A. Cavalletti, *Demolish Right Wing Culture*, in «Ill Will», 2 June 2021, <https://illwill.com/demolish-right-wing-culture>.

⁴ O. Spengler, *The Hour of Decision, Part I: Germany and World-Historical Revolution*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, George Allen & Unwin, London 1934, p. xiii.

⁵ Jesi, *Cultura di destra* cit., p. 25.

The language of ideas without words is a dominant of what today is printed and said, and its printed and spoken acceptations, in which recur those words which have been spiritualised enough so that they can serve as vehicles for ideas that require non-words, can also be found in the culture of those who do not want to be on the right, that is to say of those who should resort to words that are «material» enough to be the vehicle of ideas that demand words. This stems from the fact that the greatest part of our cultural heritage [*patri-monio*], even of those who by no means want to be on the right, is a cultural residue of the right⁶.

Notwithstanding its frequent wallowing in hollow clichés and its circulation of vapid tokens of belonging, the culture of the Right is for Jesi, at this linguistic level, *formally esoteric*, since it relies on a «morphological and syntactical skeleton of ideas, which entertain precarious, temporary and approximative relationships with words»⁷. The continuity that underlies Right-wing culture, and its suffusion through much of the *soi-disant* Left, is not, according to Jesi, a continuity of words, but one dictated by

the choice of a language of *ideas without words*, which presumes that one can truly speak – meaning speak and at the same time cloak in the secret sphere of the symbol – while doing without words, or better not worrying overmuch about symbols as modest as words, unless they are watchwords, slogans. Whence the nonchalance in the use of stereotypes, clichés, recurrent formulae; it is not just a matter of cultural impoverishment, of a vocabulary objectively limited by dint of ignorance: the language which is used is, above all, that of *ideas without words* and it can rest content with few terms or syntagms: what matters is the closed circulation of the «secret» – myths and rituals – which the

⁶ *Ibid.* Franco Ferraresi quotes Hermann Hesse's 1928 *Steppenwolf* musing that German intellectuals «are all dreaming of a speech without words that utters the inexpressive and gives form to the formless», F. Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy: The Radical Right in Italy After the War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996, p. 261, n. 1. It is interesting to contrast the idea of a right-wing culture operating through wordless ideas, with the historian Franco Venturi's diagnosis of fascism as the reign of words without ideas, as a «factory of the void» (*fabbrica del vuoto*). In his lecture «Il regime fascista» (1960), Venturi observed that the discursive practice of fascism could be reduced to the firm and profound faith that words rule the world. That it was enough to change the calendars, the names, the terms, the designations in order to change the minds, the men, the concepts, the tools. The totalitarian regime was the kingdom of the word. Or rather: the word plus the loudspeaker. Believing in the magical virtue of words and making use without restraint and scruple of the technical tools that were spreading right then: radio, cinema, press [...]. This was fascism. Machines for not thinking, operated by those who believed that the word in itself has the virtue of making things different from what they are, F. Venturi, «Il regime fascista» in *Trent'anni di storia italiana (1915-1945). Lezioni con testimonianze presentate da Franco Antonicelli*, Einaudi, Torino 1961. I am quoting directly from the sound recording of this lecture, delivered on 17 May 1960, available at: <https://soundcloud.com/user3020479/lezione-sesta-il-regime>.

⁷ Jesi, *Cultura di destra* cit., p. 26.

speaker has in common with the listeners, which all the participants in the assembly or the collective have in common⁸.

A year before the publication of *Cultura*, Jesi had published a corrected edition of Evola's 1957 translation of Spengler's *Decline of the West*, on which he had collaborated with colleagues at the University of Palermo (his first academic posting, after having worked mainly in publishing). His introduction, excised from later editions, was harshly criticised by those who mistakenly saw it as a kind of Lukácsian polemic, in the mode of the Hungarian philosopher's *The Destruction of Reason*, instead of the brilliant and politically charged philological investigation that it is. In it, Jesi explored the nexus of poetics and mythology in turn of the century Munich and its shaping impact on Spengler and his historical-philosophical attention to the «rhythms of the time of the secret, marked by the seasons of myth»⁹. In particular, as he would also do in his 1973 book *Il mito* and his contemporaneous but unpublished monograph on the jurist, mythologist and author of *Mother Right*, Johann Jakob Bachofen, Jesi identified in the debates around Bachofen's work (debates in which Walter Benjamin would attempt to stake out a radical Left position), some of the sources of Spengler's appropriation of a key theme in the poetics of "secret Germany" and in the culture of the right more broadly, namely the *religio mortis*, the religion of death.

As he wrote: «Spengler's Bachofen was the connoisseur of funerary symbols of a religion of death to which there belonged heroes, but defeated heroes [...] a power that is in continual interaction with defeat»¹⁰. Jesi argued that the notion of «cultural circles», drawn from the writings of the Africanist Leo Frobenius (a shaping influence on

⁸ Ivi, p. 28. In an interview around his edition of Spengler's *Decline*, Jesi would observe that the mythological machine functions just as well on the Left and the Right, «and with the same rhythm». However, the Right has exercised far less self-censorship in this domain, thereby giving rise to «an extremely varied and articulated set of exhibitions, reflections and manipulations; a complex of testimonies, deeper and more differentiated than those which can be found on the "Left", regarding the functioning of the mythological machine», F. Jesi, *Microscopio e binocolo sulla cultura di destra. Furio Jesi sul libro di Spengler*, in «L'Ora», 7 September 1978.

⁹ F. Jesi, «Introduzione» in O. Spengler, *Il Tramonto dell'Occidente. Lineamenti di una morfologia della Storia mondiale*, ed. R.C. Conte, M. Cottone and F. Jesi, trans. J. Evola, Longanesi & C., Milano 1978, p. xviii.

¹⁰ Jesi, «Introduzione» cit., p. xxv. For Jesi's evaluation of Bachofen's place in the politics of myth, see F. Jesi, *Mito*, Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano 1980 [1973]; F. Jesi, *Bachofen*, ed. A. Cavalletti, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2006.

Ezra Pound through his conception of *paideuma*, as well as on Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, among others), and «the seasons of the para-biological becoming of cultures are, in Spengler, schemas for an appreciation of history which has at its centre the experience of death and defeat. Culture becomes aware of itself in the instant in which it self-destructs, or in which it is destroyed by a force which contains in itself the germ of its own extinction»¹¹. Spengler's pessimism is accordingly one which «founds its oracular eloquence and its epistemology of clairvoyance on ambitions of pure prophecy in the ambit of a *religio mortis*»¹². In this ideological horizon, defeat is the sacrament of a political religion of death¹³. Nowhere is the symbology of defeat more emphatically evident than in the closing lines of Spengler's 1931 *Man and Technics*, where after prophesying the inevitable overcoming of «Faustian» white civilisation by the coloured world revolution, the German thinker declaims:

We are born into this time and must bravely follow the path to the destined end. There is no other way. Our duty is to hold on to the lost position, without hope, without rescue, like that Roman soldier whose bones were found in front of a door in Pompeii, who, during the eruption of Vesuvius, died at his post because they forgot to relieve him. That is greatness. That is what it means to be a thoroughbred. The honourable end is the one thing that can not be taken from a man¹⁴.

The theme of a literary, mythological, and political «religion of death» is the object of the first of the diptych of essays that form *Cultura di destra*. It had already occupied Jesi's attention in his *Secret Germany*, his many writings on Thomas Mann, and was similarly at the heart of his critical engagement with the poet and novelist Cesare Pavese, who in his capacity as co-editor, with the philosopher and ethnologist Ernesto De Martino, of Einaudi's famous *Collana viola* (the «Collection of Religious, Ethnological and Psychological Studies»), commissioned and oversaw translations of Kerényi, Eliade, Frobenius, Jung, Lévy-Bruhl and others, which would have an outsize effect on critical discussions of mythology in the Italian post-war. Long before the publication of pages from his secret war-time note-

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ivi*, p. XXXI.

¹³ *Ivi* p. XXIX.

¹⁴ O. Spengler, *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life*, trans. C.F. Atkinson, George Allen & Unwin, London 1931, p. 104.

books (the *Taccuino segreto*) would reveal a Pavese open to the fascination of fascist motifs, Jesi had discerned in the Piedmontese writer – whose rallying to the Communist Party in 1945 was not least of the PCI's cultural coups – the effect of a *religio mortis* nourished by the German poetry and literature of the early twentieth century. Indeed, where Pavese was wont to present his ethnological influences as an enlightened check on the darker powers of myth, Jesi saw in them the imprint of that literary manipulation of mythological materials that marked the poetic and intellectual galaxy of “secret Germany”.

Jesi was critical of the disguises (*mascherature*) that the religion of death received at the hands of figures like Mann and Kerényi, while never doubting the genuineness of these great humanists' anti-fascism. Likewise, he saw in Pavese's effort to write and live tragically, and in his eventual suicide, a particular inflection of the *religio mortis*, grounded in the irrevocable loss of *lived, collective* myth, now deconsecrated and reduced to personal mythologies of childhood, leading to the «impossibility of saving historical time through the ritual technique of ancient festival» – where festival or festivity, *la festa*, is understood as the carnal forum for the experience of myth. Incapable of the «Faustian compromises» and felicitous mystifications that allowed Mann to create rich mythological tapestries in works like *Joseph and His Brothers*, Pavese's novels could only portray faded afterimages of a now impossible festival, simulacra of initiation, in a world where emblematic words were now devoid of magico-religious efficacy, while his own personal and poetic trajectory had as its «dynamic norm [...] the substitution of the myth of the festival with the myth of sacrifice»¹⁵. Pavese's communism too, dominated by the themes of duty, sacrifice, and guilt (not least at Pavese's lack of wartime commitment) could also be seen as shadowed by such a religion of death.

But where Pavese sought to produce a poetics that was the «moral theorisation of the need to act and life even if the city is deconsecrated and the sacred treasure of the countryside are no longer accessible»¹⁶, one in which the link of *ethos* and *mythos* took the form of a human sacrifice (figural and personal) at the end of a profane festival – as Jesi would argue in his introduction to Pavese's trilogy, *La Bella estate* – the Right-wing culture anatomised in Jesi's 1979 book would enter-

¹⁵ F. Jesi, *Letteratura e mito*, Einaudi, Torino 1968; new ed., introd. A. Cavalletti, Einaudi, Torino 2002, p. 175.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 166.

tain a far less tragic and far more instrumental relation to the secret if hollow heart of the mythological machine.

In his 1964 essay on «Pavese, Myth and the Science of Myth», Jesi had programmatically declared:

Secret Germany: it doesn't seem rash to define it as that religion of death that was doubly «secret», both because it proceeds from the innermost «secret» of poets, and because it is perennially masked beneath the defences of consciousness, save, perhaps, in Rilke. «Public», rather than «secret» Germany, demonstrated with Nazi ideology its effort to try and appropriate that secret current and to turn it into a social and popular reality, stripping its status as the property of the undoubtedly «aristocratic» circles in which it had hitherto lived. The repugnance of Kerényi and Mann faced with the demonstrations of the Nazi youth, testifies to a hostility that developed between the «public» and the «secret» Germany, when the former wanted to take possession of the latter¹⁷.

The first of the two essays that compose *Cultura di destra*, on «Right-wing Culture and the Culture of Death», is a signal example of the «knowledge by composition» that defined Jesi's philological art. Beginning with an appreciation of the consumption of «spiritual luxury» evidenced in the manipulation of the «eternal and metamorphic values» of an undefined past in a Jugendstil design magazine, Jesi ranges across Frobenius's disquisitions on German science, the racial underpinnings of primitivism, funeral symbolism, the figure of Jack the Ripper in the writings of Frank Wedekind and Aleister Crowley, E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Vampir* read as an allegorical-prophetic text about German Nazism, the loss of centre that characterises the monumental scenography and architecture of Nazism as «defensive rituals of "foundation"»¹⁸, and the panicked Judeophobia driving the core of the Nazi regime, including the occult and ethnological investigations of Himmler's *Ahnenerbe*, the SS's research institute for the study of «ancestral heritage», in which Jesi glimpsed «the mythology of killing and being killed as the procedure of acceleration and advent of the foundation of a new kingdom, a new law, a new man»¹⁹. While recognising in Nazism the prerogatives of bourgeois instrumentality and capitalist domination, Jesi does not shy away from taking seriously the idea of a Nazi esotericism, linked to the exterminatory-sacrificial core of right-wing *religio mortis*. In this perspective: «The religion

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 159.

¹⁸ Jesi, *Cultura di destra* cit., p. 91.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 97.

and mythology of death are the defensive and tragic – but not despairing – reaction of those who, like the protagonists of Nazi power and ritualism, feel abandoned, beset, «poisoned», by adversaries who in their turn proclaim themselves as elect, and struggle to re-establish relationships with a true sacrality that has withdrawn into itself»²⁰.

But Jesi's most incisive words on the *religio mortis* of the Right are drawn not from Nazism, or from Italian fascism – with its petty-bourgeois coldness and cynicism vis-à-vis mythology²¹ and its «superficial death-mysticism,» hiding an «interested optimistic and vitalist cynicism»²² – but from the Spanish *falange* and the Romanian Iron Guard. It is the forcefield of the latter that Jesi tackles the nexus of myth, death, and politics in the writing of Mircea Eliade – whose book *Yoga* Jesi had edited and who was not unmoved by what he perceived as a «perfidious attack» by the young Italian scholar²³. Compared to the poverty of the Francoist call «*Abajo la inteligencia! Viva la muerte!*» shouted by the general Millán Astray against Miguel de Unamuno in the aula magna of the University of Salamanca in 1936, the Romanian Iron Guard and its intellectual auxiliaries vaunt a much richer brew of Orthodox Christianity, non-Christian esotericism, references to the «orphism» of ancient Thrace, the racist and telluric anthropology of authentic Romanian man, anti-Semitism and anti-Westernism.

But Jesi focuses especially on the funereal eroticism of the ballad *The Legend of Mason Manole*, the tale of the builder who had to immure his own wife to complete his edifice. Jesi notes Eliade's then recently revealed fascist past, his writings on the redemption of the stock in the «legionnaire revolution» of the Iron Guard, his mourning for its leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, his work as cultural attaché for the same government that deported thousands of Jews – but also a «discovery of non-European man and his spiritual universe» which for Jesi is no antidote to racial fascism. But Jesi's chief evidence lies in that exquisitely sacrificial logic of *winning by dying* (*vincere morendo*), which for Jesi lies at the core of right-wing culture and which makes the legend of Mason Manole into the «verita-

²⁰ Ivi, p. 93.

²¹ Ivi, p. 56.

²² Ivi, p. 91.

²³ M. Eliade, *Journal, IV: 1979–1985*, trans. M. Linscott Ricketts, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018, p. 17 (entry for 6 June 1979).

ble *hieròs logos* of that religion of death». This is the «ideology» common to multiple myths of sacrifice which Eliade himself encapsulated as follows:

to last, a construction (house, technical accomplishment, but also a spiritual undertaking) must be animated, that is, must receive both life and a soul. The «transference» of the soul is possible only by means of a sacrifice; in other words, by a violent death. We may even say that the victim continues its existence after death, no longer in its physical body but in the new body — the construction — which it has «animated» by its immolation; we may even speak of an «architectonic body» substituted for a body of flesh. The ritual transference of life by means of a sacrifice is not confined to constructions (temples, cities, bridges, houses) and utilitarian objects: human victims are also immolated to assure the success of an undertaking, or even the historical longevity of a spiritual enterprise²⁴.

It is worth noting that a version of same myth plays a pivotal role – albeit one not commented upon by the Italian scholar – in another text studied by Jesi, namely György Lukács's 1911 dialogue, «On the Poverty of Spirit». A Hungarian fable, that of Mason Kelemen, closely related to that of Master Manole, is employed by the Hungarian philosopher as an intimate allegory of the situation of the artist and thinker, as well as of his relation to Imra Seidler, whose suicide was a caesura in Lukács's emotional and intellectual life. In «On the Poverty of Spirit», we read:

You are familiar with the ancient [Hungarian] legend of Kelemen Kömives and the building of a castle. Every night the wall, which the masons have built during the day, crumbles. Finally, the masons decide that the first wife to arrive, bringing dinner to her husband, will be sacrificed and embalmed in the wall. [...] Work grows out of life, but it also outgrows life. And while work originates in things human, it is also inhuman – indeed, anti-human. The cement that binds work to its birth-giving life also divides work and life. However, this cement is made of human blood²⁵.

In a remarkable study of Lukács and Irma Seidler's relation, Agnes Heller writes that «Lukács incorporated his love in the work. He incorporated it in the way that the hero of a popular Hungarian ballad did, who cemented the walls of the castle with the blood of the builder's wife, so that the castle could rise up above life like a solitary

²⁴ M. Eliade, «Master Manole and the Monastery of Arges» in *Zalmoxis, The Vanishing God*, trans. W.R. Trask, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1972, pp. 183-4.

²⁵ G. Lukács, «On Poverty of Spirit» in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. A. Kadarkay, Blackwell, Oxford 1995, p. 50.

peak», concluding that: «It is impossible not to conceive of life as an instrument, when we approach life starting from forms»²⁶.

Developing, in a unique and unsettling direction, Horkheimer and Adorno's insight from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* into the *mimetic* character of anti-Semitism, Jesi will argue that the «secret message» of Eliade's doctrine as it transpires from his *History of Religious Ideas* – the notion that myths and religions are product of God's withdrawal – is ultimately grounded in an appropriation of Jewish Kabbalistic doctrine, which in turn finds its most intense expression in the messianic heresies of Sabbatai Zevi and Jakob Frank, where just as «God "withdraws" so that creation may take place, the Messiah infringes the law so that the epiphany of the new law may come»²⁷. Jesi even identifies a «paradoxical coincidence between the mystical self-portraits of the persecutors and the persecuted», between the theme of *winning by dying* in the sacrificial far-Right and the Jewish messianic nexus of guilt and transgression – here lay «the tragicness of the condition [of Zevi, the holy sinner]: the law that he transgressed had to be transgressed for the new law of the new kingdom»²⁸. In the wake of God's self-exile there emerges the figure of the fascist martyr, who chooses guilt to accelerate the new world.

The second essay in *Cultura's* diptych, «The Language of Ideas without Words» reprises the Spenglerian motif of wordless ideas to explore the relation between a sacred-esoteric fascism and a profane-exoteric one, in the understanding that these do not overlap with the distinction, common in the Italian 1970s, between a respectable, «be-suited» fascism and a violent, plebeian one. Here Jesi ranges widely across the production of the radical Right – from obsequious studies of the SS's European volunteers and their bonds to the occult Tradition of templars and mages to Julius Evola's preface to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, passing through the eroticisation of Mussolini in fascist novels. He notes, pointedly – reprising the theme of winning-by-losing, of the useless task and the virile apology of defeat – «that we can by no means exclude this: that at least some of the terrorist acts of the last few years were projected as useless tasks by the in-

²⁶ Á. Heller, «Quando la vita si schianta nella forma. György Lukács e Irma Seidler» in F. Fehér, Á. Heller, G. Markus, A. Radnóti, *La scuola di Budapest. Sul giovane Lukács*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1978, pp. 40-3.

²⁷ Jesi, *Cultura di destra* cit., p. 73.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 74.

structors and didacts of the Tradition, who led the neophytes to believe that they were in themselves *useful* tasks for them»²⁹.

But the constellation in which Jesi places the 1970s nexus between Tradition and Terror demonstrates a desire to map the indefinite domain of wordless ideas, spanning the sacred and the profane, the esoteric and the exoteric, into regions that force us to give up the comforts that would derive from treating «Right-wing culture» as the monopoly of avowed fascists or Nazis. Jesi's desecrating montage of several symptomatic specimens of the «language of ideas without words» places Evola – once hailed by the neo-fascist politician Giorgio Almirante as «our Marcuse» – in contiguity with a meticulous analysis of two speeches commemorating the national poet Giosuè Carducci delivered by Jesi's maternal grandfather Percy Chirone (a public oration and one declaimed in his freemason lodge, thus spanning the esoteric and the exoteric)³⁰. This is followed by a brilliantly caustic philology of a salient product of twentieth-century Italian culture industry, Liala (Amalia Liana Negretti Odescalchi), a bestselling author of Romantic feuilleton novels (an associate of poet and fascist precursor Gabriele D'Annunzio, who coined her *nom de plume*), and a caustic segue into a journalistic profile of Ferrari CEO and vogueish aristocrat Luca Cordero di Montezemolo. What brings such seemingly heterogeneous figures together? It is a certain linguistic *use* of the past which orbits around signifiers of *spiritual* and *material luxury* that are both connoted as elite and designed for general consumption. This is a language which is pervaded by acts of devotion to the fetish of spiritualised property, including the typically fascist spiritualisation of industry itself³¹ – an aestheticization of the economy that disavows the impersonality and automatism of capital. But it also revolves around precious symbols, the luxury-fetishes of the Right: «the Graal, symbolic flowers, the zodiac, the swastika, the cave, the labyrinth, the rainbow, etc»³².

²⁹ Ivi, p. 136.

³⁰ As Ingrid Rowland notes, Bruno Jesi, Furio's Jewish father, had been granted Aryan status based on his military service as a cavalry officer in Ethiopia and had died in 1943 of wounds incurred in combat. Notwithstanding the autobiographical dimensions of *Cultura*, especially in its attention to Jewish fascist milieus and to the linguistic habitus of the Turin bourgeoisie whence Jesi hailed, the colonial dimension of fascism remains muted, I.D. Rowland, «Furio Jesi and the Culture of the Right» in R. Bod, J. Maat and T. Weststeijn (eds.), *History of the Humanities III: The Modern Humanities*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 293-310.

³¹ Jesi, *Cultura di destra* cit., p. 189.

³² Ivi, p. 213.

While working in different genres (metapolitical tracts for initiates, eulogies, mass-market literature) and addressing disparate audiences (adepts of Tradition, patriots or freemasons, petty-bourgeois housewives) all these texts register the «ideological need to flatten the differences that history posits in the past and to manipulate a compact, uniform and substantially undifferentiated value» – a value that in Jesi's grandfather's speeches circulates through such vapid and proto-fascistic formula as «a masculine visage», «virile pride», «fateful historical moments», etc.³³. Value here stands for military valour as well as the value of «valuable stuff» – the language of the Right operates like a luxury good, but so does its undifferentiated, sacralised, empty image of the good, desirable death. It is the dedifferentiation of the past as value that allows it to circulate at will in the present. This is a language that draws on a whole inherited cultural apparatus which is «technicized» (Jesi drew repeatedly on Kerényi's idea of «technicized myth» while abandoning the notion of a genuine myth as counterpart), and «transformed into a culture-fetish, sacral and *exoteric*. Cultural elements are as it were homogenised: in this mush, this baby food, which is declared to be precious but also digestible by the passably educated classes, there are no longer real contrasts, edges, thorns, or hardnesses»³⁴. It is a language of lyrical commonplaces presented as a «model of clarity», as graspable by all, and thus resonating with the intimate affective appeal of the cliché-ridden vapidities of Liala's feuilletons, which operate with a language that is efficacious to the extent that it is not rationally comprehensible while it is emotionally grasped. As Jesi notes:

To understand [Capire] a language thus turns into appreciating (to the point of adopting) a language that shows itself to be efficacious to the extent that it is not an object of comprehension. If it really were comprehensible, it would not have that magical efficacy, it would make one think, and thus toil, and it would compel one to exercise one's capacity to understand what is happening. Liala's language is not *understood* by all her readers; but it is for all her readers a fetish that serves to give pleasure, and especially the pleasure stemming from the reduction of the fatigue that comes from thinking³⁵.

The language of the Right declares clarity but channels the obscure, camouflages its repugnance for history under the worship of a

³³ Ivi, p. 157.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 164.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 166.

gloriously hollow past, while «its truly corpselike immobilism feigns to be perennial living force»³⁶. Contrasting the devotees of Liala and those of Rainer Maria Rilke, Jesi will distinguish between an exoteric enjoyment of the luxury-language of feeling-without-comprehension and an esoteric one. The first, associated with Liala, is a «non-understanding which is the satisfied belief that one understands», the second is a devotion to «non-understanding» *tout court*, proper to devotees who delight in the incomprehensibility and inefability of the fetish³⁷.

In tacit dialogue, no doubt, with the Benjaminian critique of fascist aestheticization, the final section of *Cultura* undertakes a parallel reading of two towering para-fascist writers, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Luigi Pirandello, around the theme, already rehearsed in the treatment of neofascist culture, of the «brutality of the useless gesture», or useless task. Jesi presents D'Annunzio, by contrast with his legions of followers, as a somewhat liminal and even tragic figure who, while a master at the technicization of mythological materials, gives the impression of realising, despite himself, that the past of myth could not be manipulated at will. D'Annunzio seems to recognise «an autonomous permanence of the mythical nuclei of those [mythological] materials: nuclei that seemed to him to escape his manipulations. [...] Beyond the undifferentiated past which he continuously manipulated, he came up against a past composed of distinctly differentiated hypostases, a lost past»³⁸. This tonality of irretrievable loss, of metaphysical and metahistorical defeat – already noted in Jesi's introduction to Spengler and in the neofascist esotericism of Evola and his acolytes – accompanies the horizon of the useless task, the right-wing marriage of pessimism and activism, a behavioural *style* guaranteed by the reference to a homogenised past and crystallised as a kind of brutality. As Jesi comments:

All the spiritual luxury of right-wing culture corresponds to a brutality of public and private, social and familial behaviour, which does not appear as in the least gratuitous to its apologists so long as the latter are satisfied with the undifferentiated past with which they fabricate fetishes of virility, heroic strength, sacrifice unto death, discipline, hierarchy, fatherland and family to defend as their ironclad possessions, and as long as they believe that the mush

³⁶ Ivi, p. 165.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 172.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 208.

they manipulate truly is life's eternal present (the true atemporal past, *ergo* the true present)³⁹.

This is the framework, or better *style* common, for instance, to D'Annunzio and the «sacred and esoteric fascism» that orbits around Evola, the style of *winning-by-dying*, of homicidal self-immolation, of a morbid, sacrificial «heroism» – which is of course, as Jesi notes, eminently manipulable for profoundly esoteric, and capitalist, purposes, as testified by the role of that «sacred Right» in the Italian strategy of tension. But commonalities are not homogeneities; Jesi's philological capacity to discriminate among modalities of Right-wing culture and language and poetics is among his greatest lessons for us – as we see for instance in his clinical differentiation between the brutalising aesthetics of the «useless task» in D'Annunzio and Pirandello. As he notes, while D'Annunzio's «useless task» is a didactic mystification, tinged with tragedy and oriented toward future cosmic revelations, «Pirandello's is a useless brutality without mystification, for it is a brutality made useless, nihilistic, and profoundly exoteric by the loss of any collective past, and therefor also of any future»⁴⁰ – more proof, if proof were needed, that fascistic violence is not correlated with *either* the sacred or the profane, and that the *religio mortis* can have its aesthetic-political afterlives even after religion's definitive death.

While writing in a radically different media ecology than our own, I don't think it is necessary to belabour why Jesi's reflections on the nexus between the aesthetics of the useless task, *religio mortis* and the language of ideas without words may provide tools with which to think against our own present – that grotesque genre which is the prolix and self-pitying plagiarised manifesto of the lone male racist mass shooter might be testimony enough.

But I'd like to conclude in a somewhat different vein, by tarrying some more with Spengler's *Ideen ohne Worte*. Jesi does not in fact say much about the book from which that formulation was taken. Let me turn then to an anonymous review of the original edition of the book published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* in December 1933. The reviewer summarises the book's thesis, quite faithfully, as follows:

That the world is threatened by two revolutions: one white and one colored. The white revolution is the «social» one and it is the catastrophic re-

³⁹ Ivi, p. 211.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 218.

sult of the collapse of civilization in the eighteenth century and the advent of the reign of the masses, especially those that cluster – soulless and faceless – in the big cities, a process which took place in the nineteenth century, under the sign of liberalism, democracy, universal suffrage, and what is globally known as demagoguery. The other revolution is that of the peoples of color, who, being more prolific than the peoples of the white race, will eventually overwhelm it. Therefore, for us, Europeans of the twentieth century, the question arises: What to do? Spengler does not answer this agonizing question very clearly⁴¹.

The reviewer was Benito Mussolini, who had founded *Il Popolo* as an interventionist newspaper in 1914, and whose anonymity gave him license to quote those passages of praise that the German revolutionary-conservative lavished at his own leadership, emblematic of that “Caesarism” that Spengler had announced as far back as *Decline* as the only political form capable of giving shape to the formless, declining world of a later «civilisation» (as opposed to «culture»). Perhaps more interesting, in terms of mutable ideological contests on the Right, was Mussolini’s underscoring of the incompatibility between the Spenglerian notion of race and that «vulgar, Darwinist or materialistic spirit that is today the fashion among the anti-Semites in Europe and America» – a patent dig at the new German regime whose racial policies he would fall in line with 5 years later⁴².

This was not the first notable point of contact between Spengler and Mussolini. In 1928, both had written prefaces to the Italian translation of a volume by a young demographer and disciple of Spengler⁴³, Richard Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli* (Regression of Births – Death of Peoples), who Mussolini had approached via the Italian Consulate after reading his work in German. Mussolini’s preface, while rapping Korherr on the knuckles for imprecisions about Italian demography, and echoing Spengler’s glum prophecies about the effects of intellectualised megalopolitan living on the biopolitical well-being of nations, is notable for the centrality

⁴¹ Anonymous, *Spengler*, «Il Popolo d’Italia», n. 297, 15 December 1933. On Mussolini and Spengler, see also R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. 1. Gli anni del consenso. 1929-1936*, Einaudi, Torino 1974.

⁴² Anonymous, *Spengler* cit.

⁴³ R. Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli*, pref. O. Spengler and B. Mussolini, Libreria del Littorio, Roma 1928. Spengler had written to Korherr in 1926 that «up to now I have read nothing which has completed and deepened a suggestion in my book into such knowledge and understanding», O. Spengler, *Spengler Letters: 1913-1936*, ed. and trans. A. Helps, George Allen & Unwin, London 1966, p. 203.

that it gives to what it would not be inapt to term the «fear of a Black planet»⁴⁴. Foreshadowing the contemporary rhetoric of Great Replacements and white genocides – with all the brutal and useless tasks they inspire – Mussolini improbably places at the centre of his warnings about white European demographic collapse, and the «prolific races» at its door, the example of the «ultra-fertile» Black population of the United States, citing a riot in Harlem in July 1927, «barely tamed» after a night of violent clashes by the police, which faced off with «compact masses of Blacks» (the only riot in Harlem that I could find any record of from that date was actually between Puerto Ricans and Jews). Korherr's 1935 book *Denatalism: A Warning to the German People*, forecasting white decline from the statistical record of ancient Rome and Greece, was prefaced by Heinrich Himmler⁴⁵. In 1943, as the chief inspector of the statistical bureau of the SS he delivered to Himmler a report entitled *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question*, calculating for his boss the decrease in the Jewish population in Nazi-controlled territories to date.

As *Hour of Decision* makes patent (a book originally published by George Allen & Unwin, which can now be found in print with Rogue Scholars Press, purveyor of sundry texts by Mishima, Celine, Jünger and more current fare like alt-right favourite “Bronze Age Perverter”), the *Ideen ohne Worte*, the wordless ideas that fine their non-rational reason in Spengler's nostalgic-aristocratic conception of race (as stock, breeding, superiority), are inseparable from the all-consuming, if not always nameless, fear of what white supremacist ideologue Lothrop Stoddard – an important reference in Spengler's book – named *The Rising Tide of Color*, in explicit reaction to W.E.B. Du Bois's prophecies, in *The African Roots of War*, about the “War of the Color Line”. As Spengler's 1933 text suggests race, and especially the nebulous and all-potential idea of whiteness, is the quintessential “idea without words”, the prime mover of Right-wing culture, the pulsing void at the heart of the mythological machine of the Right.

⁴⁴ Though it's worth noting that Spengler deemed the Ethiopian war an «evil adventure», Spengler, *Spengler Letters* cit., p. 305. On the influence of Spengler's conception of Caesarism on Mussolini, see De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. 1. Gli anni del consenso. 1929-1936* cit.

⁴⁵ J. Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, trans. R.R. Nybakken, University of California Press, Oakland 2016, pp. 325-6.

Abstract

Shortly before his untimely death, Furio Jesi published a nuanced, trenchant and controversial anatomy of right-wing thought and mythopoesis, *Cultura di destra* (1979), cutting across its diverse reactionary, modernist, mystical, traditionalist and racist formations. Jesi excavated the culture of the right's defining reliance on a mythological machine that produces the past as «a kind of homogenised mush that can be moulded at will», and which allows one to declare that «there exist indisputable values, indicated by capitalised words» – Family, Honour, Work, Tradition, Civilisation, and last but not least, Culture. This article explores Jesi's engagement with the likes of Julius Evola, Mircea Eliade, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Oswald Spengler, while also touching on the relation between this diagnostic work and Jesi's broader analysis of the nexus between literature, myth and politics, with particular reference to his interrogation of the works of the Italian novelist, poet and intellectual Cesare Pavese. What can Jesi's method bring to a critical theory of the contemporary recombinant right? Or, to borrow Spengler's formula, so crucial to Jesi's investigation, what are today's «ideas without words»?

Poco prima della sua prematura scomparsa, Furio Jesi pubblicò un'anatomia sfumata, tagliente e controversa del pensiero e mitopoiesi della destra, Cultura di destra (1979), attraversando le sue diverse formazioni – contro-rivoluzionarie, moderniste, misticheggianti, tradizionaliste e razziste. Jesi enuclea la dipendenza costitutiva di questa «cultura» da una macchina mitologica che produce il passato come «una sorta di pappa omogeneizzata che si può modellare e mantenere in forma nel modo più utile» e che consente di dichiarare che «esistono valori non discutibili, indicati da parole con l'iniziale maiuscola» – Famiglia, Onore, Lavoro, Tradizione, Civiltà e, non ultima, Cultura. Questo articolo esplora il coinvolgimento di Jesi con personaggi del calibro di Julius Evola, Mircea Eliade, Gabriele D'Annunzio e Oswald Spengler, toccando anche il rapporto tra questo lavoro diagnostico e la più ampia analisi di Jesi del nesso tra letteratura, mito e politica, con particolare riferimento alla sua disamina delle opere e dei miti di Cesare Pavese. Cosa può apportare il metodo di Jesi a una teoria critica delle mutazioni della destra contemporanea? O, per prendere in prestito la formula di Spengler, così

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cruciale per l'indagine di Jesi, quali sono le «idee senza parole» che dominano il nostro presente?

Keywords: myth, racism, religion of death, right-wing politics, sacrifice.

Parole chiave: mito, politica di destra, razzismo, religio mortis, sacrificio.