

Under the Enemy's Spell: Jesi's Critique of Humanist Opposition against Right-wing Culture Ester Van Ackere*

The growing influence in culture and politics of a «new right» and of political myth has recently sparked international interest in the work of Italian philosopher, mythologist and literary critic Furio Jesi. The problem of myth and right-wing culture are at the core of his whole thought, but gain full articulation in his last published monograph, *Cultura di destra*. In this work, he analyzes the ideas of extreme right-wing and (neo-)fascist movements and intellectuals in late 19th and 20th century *Mitteleuropa*, and unmasks the right's fascination with myth as an alluring cover of cultural-historical revival risking to revert in its most extreme forms into a mysticism of death and sacrifice (*religio mortis*)¹. Although not (yet) translated into English, this book and its possible usefulness for understanding new forms of right-wing culture today has recently gained some attention in anglo-phone academia².

Less attention has been dedicated, however, to Jesi's critique of liberal-individualist and radical left-wing responses to this culture of the right and its political myths. Yet a critique of anti-right-wing humanism runs as a guiding thread through Jesi's work: from his analysis of Thomas Mann's humanist approach to myth, over his criticism of Cesare Pavese's fascination with death, to his ambiguous relationship with his teacher in mythology, Karl Kerényi. In this paper, I focus on

* I would like to acknowledge my supervisors at KU Leuven, Stéphane Symons and Emanuele Caminada, for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ I use the French translation: F. Jesi, *Culture de droite*, trans. A. Savona, Bordeaux, La Tempête 2021.

² I. D. Rowland, «Furio Jesi and the Culture of the Right» in *The Making of the Humanities. Volume III: The Modern Humanities*, ed. R. Bod, J. Maat, and T. Weststeijn, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2010, pp. 283–98; E. Manera, *Myth and Right-wing Culture in Furio Jesi*, in «Theory & Event» 22, No. 4, 2019, pp. 1069–81. Recently, Alberto Toscano gave a lecture «Ideas Without Words: Furio Jesi & the Culture of the Right» at Berkeley University: <https://complit.berkeley.edu/events/ideas-without-words-furio-jesi-culture-right>.

the latter example. As a young researcher of myth, Jesi had contacted the established Hungarian mythologist in 1964, after which a correspondence followed for several years³. Inspired by their conversations, Jesi, throughout his work, critically reworked Kerényi's «apolitical», liberal and individualist form of humanist mythology into a leftist revolutionary and radically democratic approach to myth. Despite Kerényi's humanism, indeed, Jesi believed that his teacher's «apoliticism» and individualism made him unable to escape right-wing myth and its *religio mortis*, an accusation that sparked the ire of Kerényi and abruptly ended their correspondence⁴. Yet as we will see, and as Jesi came to realize himself, the problem he detected in Kerényi's mythology ultimately resurfaces in his own democratic reworking of that mythology.

I claim, then, that for Jesi the major problem of humanist resistance against right-wing myth lies not so much in either its individualism or collectivism, but rather in the inability of both approaches to escape the violence of what he has in his later work named the «mythological machine». Jesi indeed imagines political myth as a linguistic-historical machine that produces *mythologies*, i.e. narratives about a mythic origin of historical time. In this way, it suggests the actual existence of a mythic substance at its (probably empty) core, even though the center of the machine remains blocked to historical human beings because of its impenetrable walls⁵. The functioning of the mythological machine is clearest in right-wing culture: their mythology typically gestures towards a substantive original «Tradition» or «Culture» allegedly lost to modernity, but still demanding from beyond history, i.e. from the place of death, human beings' historical sacrifices for its renewal⁶. Yet Jesi warns that the most «anti-mythic» humanist and progressive principles like «Freedom» or «Revolution» can fall prey to the machine too, precisely by *not believing* in the existence of a substantive myth governing history: «Machines seem to purport to contain inaccessible realities; but we cannot exclude that just this might be their cunning: [...] alluding to an immovable prime mover precisely in order to be disbelieved, thus induc-

³ K. Kerényi and F. Jesi, *Demone e mito*, ed. A. Cavalletti and Magda Kerényi, Macerata, Quodlibet 1999.

⁴ Jesi a Kerényi, 16 maggio 1968 in *Demone e mito* cit., pp. 114-15.

⁵ F. Jesi, *La fête et la machine mythologique*, trans. Fabien Vallos, Paris, Editions MIX 2008, pp. 113-18.

⁶ Jesi, *Culture* cit., p. 227.

ing belief solely in them, in machines»⁷. In other words, a humanist mythology can also demand historical sacrifices in the name of its «eternal» humanist values, and thus revert into the very «religion of death» it aims to escape.

After briefly exploring Jesi's understanding of «right-wing culture» and its «religion of death» in his *Cultura di destra*, I rely, for the rest of my article, mainly on two (sets of) texts. For Jesi's critique of liberal-individualist, apolitical humanism, I examine his late essays on Kerényi⁸, which outlines his main criticism towards his master. For his critique of collective, radically democratic and revolutionary forms of humanist resistance against right-wing myth, on the other hand, I return to Jesi's earlier drafted *Spartakus*⁹, which contains the clearest articulation of his critique of a more political form of humanist resistance against myth.

1. *Right-wing Culture and the Religion of Death*

Jesi defines right-wing culture not by its particular (e.g. racist or supremacist) *content*, but rather by a particular cultural-communicative *style* as well as by the particular way of the powerful to conceptualize the relation with the past, with myth, and with death. Broadly speaking, the culture of the right designates for Jesi above all what he calls, borrowing a concept of Oswald Spengler, the «language of ideas without words»¹⁰. It typically uses a language that is composed of «stereotypes, ready-made phrases and recurring expressions» with which it «pretends to be able to say and at the same time to dissimulate in the secret sphere of the symbol»¹¹. «Ideas without words» are «sacred» symbols that immediately evoke a «secret» core shared by a particular cultural collective (yet denied to outsiders). Such a language

⁷ F. Jesi, «Knowability of the Festival» in *Time and Festivity. Essays on Myth and Literature*, ed. A. Cavalletti, trans. C. Viti, New York, Seagull Books 2021, p. 90. If an English translation of Jesi's work is available, I cite that translation. All other translations in this article are mine.

⁸ F. Jesi, «I «Pensieri segreti» del mitologo»; «L'esperienza dell'isola»; Il «mito dell'uomo» in *Materiali mitologici. Mito e antropologia nella cultura mitteleuropea*, Torino, Einaudi 1979, resp. pp. 3-53; pp. 54-66; pp. 67-80.

⁹ F. Jesi, *Spartakus. The symbology of revolt*, ed. A. Cavalletti, trans. A. Toscano, New York, Seagull Books 2014.

¹⁰ Jesi, *Culture* cit., p. 22.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 25.

thus says by hiding: it gestures at a cultural treasure deeply buried in the collective psyche, beyond the superficiality of the materiality of language and the chaos of the modern world.

Because of its apparent immediacy, Jesi writes, the language of ideas without words pretends to be «democratic», i.e. accessible to everyone in the particular cultural collective and not only to its cultural elite. It is composed, as a *bricolage*, of symbolic, narrative and material remnants of the past, mixed into a homogeneous «soup, considered precious, but also easy to digest for the whole middle-educated class». Without respect for historical nuance, it simplistically evokes cultural or material «objects of value» that not only give the cultural collective standing and historical importance, but that also provides a «model of clarity [...] which provokes no perplexity, to which everyone is habituated»¹². In this sense, the «exotericism» of the language of ideas without words, Jesi argues, has nothing to do with enlightened democratic self-emancipation, since in right-wing culture «to *understand* a language means paradoxically [...] to appreciate [...] a language that is efficient precisely to the extent that it doesn't require to be understood»¹³. The «language of ideas without words» instead relieves the collective of the task of thinking, tempting them with intimacy and the privilege not of recognizing but of *being* «recognized by knowledge», i.e. by truth¹⁴. It is thus, Jesi argues, a seductive tool to organize a mass of people around a «culture-fetish», and is as such easily mobilized to legitimize and stabilize power relations¹⁵.

However, the exoteric evocation of a mythic secret or «wordless idea» through language also makes the secret vulnerable for criticism and historical reinterpretation. This is why, as Jesi already suggested in his essay on Bachofen, those who benefit most from myth – the cultural elite – are sometimes tempted to «rescue» the secret to the cosmic «deep time» of death, away from the contingencies of historical time and from the hands of «ordinary human beings». This «esoteric» movement of the powerful, believing themselves to be «belonging to a minority that considers itself privileged but which at the same time is continually faced with danger»¹⁶, positions the elite at the intersection

¹² Previous citations from *ivi*, p. 132.

¹³ *Ivi*, pp. 133-134.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 136.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 132.

¹⁶ F. Jesi, «Bachofen e il rapporto con l'antico» in *Bachofen*, by F. Jesi, ed. A. Cavalletti, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri 2005, p. 28.

of myth and history, and provides them with the ability to bestow a *cosmic* meaning upon the symbol. In some more exoteric versions of 20th century fascism – Jesi mentions the Italian *squadristi* – this cosmic meaning, reflected in funerary images such as skulls, remained a merely rhetorical technique giving some «mythological fever» to wordless ideas. Yet in other (especially Spanish, Romanian and German) (neo-)fascist movements, Jesi argues, this esoteric movement created a proper «religion» or «mysticism of death», since their funerary symbolism gained a «hegemonical, totalizing» character and became «exhibited as the only point of anchorage of the norms that oblige to act or not to act, of the modalities of judgment of oneself and of the others, of the world, of the vision of history and of nature»¹⁷.

According to Jesi, especially in early 20th century German right-wing culture this totalizing, cosmic meaning of symbolism took its inspiration from Bachofen's notion of the funerary symbol «resting in itself». Bachofen believed that symbolism is both the expression of a spiritual mimicry of the universe and of humanity's creative and historical faculty of enunciation. Yet he realized that human language can never *reach* the secret core of being even though it *refers* to it, since linguistic interpretation necessarily impedes complete unification with the universe's wordless spiritual «idea» of the symbol. Therefore, only through dissolution (*Auflösung*) of what makes us truly living human beings, our linguistic capacity and historicity, can we access the symbol as referring to nothing but its own mythic idea – as a true «idea without words». In other words, from an esoteric point of view, not by the revivification of a cultural-*historical* past, but only through the destruction of history and language *as such* – by *dying* as human beings – can the symbolic idea be saved and reborn¹⁸. This illusory projection of a purifying, soteriological meaning onto historical destruction, silence and death is what Jesi calls, throughout his work, a «religion of death» (*religio mortis*)¹⁹.

As Jesi points out, Bachofen's notion of the «symbol resting in itself» allows the esoteric to invalidate any criticism of his own prejudices and fears: «in any case, nothing can reach them in their truth»²⁰.

¹⁷ Jesi, *Culture* cit., pp. 50-51.

¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 40-41.

¹⁹ On the concept of «religion of death», E. Manera, *Furio Jesi. Mito, violenza, memoria*, Roma, Carocci 2012.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 45.

The right-wing *mystification* of the cultural secret, he suggests, constitutes in this sense only an «appealing» cover hiding the anxious *demonization* of the «historical forces» considered responsible for myth's decay. For German Nazis, for example, the Jews and everything they stood for were the primary representatives of these forces. Detecting a shift in German anti-Semitic literature of the early 20th century from «merely» racist tropes towards an obsession with Jewish conspiracies, with the «electedness» of the Jews and with Jewish mystic and occult movements, Jesi argues that Nazism's growing mystification of German and Aryan symbolism can be understood as a defensive attempt at exorcising what they considered to be the «dark magical» forces of the Jews as primary representatives of a cosmic, «evil» principle of historical decay²¹.

From this esoteric point of view, right-wing symbolism functions in Jesi's view as an amulet against the «dark force» of history, assuring the renewal of the lost «authentic secret» through the murder and sacrifice of the representatives of the «cosmic evil» of historical time. However, Jesi argues, although the Jews were for German Nazism the primary («elected») human beings to be sacrificed, ultimately the «Jewishness» (or «historical existence») within *all* human beings had to be exorcised and killed, including in the German soldiers who sacrificed themselves «for the German cause». The collective suicide of historical humanity is from the esoteric right-wing point of view indeed the only way to a cosmic reversal of historical decay and to a spiritual renaissance. This *religio mortis*, Jesi writes, may explain why the Nazis in the last instant preferred historical defeat over strategy and the possibility of historical victory²².

2. Jesi's Criticism of Kerényi's Individualistic Humanism

In the struggle against right-wing approaches to myth, Jesi is initially inspired by Karl Kerényi's attempt to counter a «technified» approach to myth for elitist or power-political purposes with the universal and humanist concept of «genuine myth». For Kerényi, genuine myth designates the human condition of the disinterested, sponta-

²¹ Ivi, pp. 69-84.

²² Ivi, p. 84.

neous creation of symbolic meaning²³. He believes that mythic images gain existence only at the moment when they are imagined in concrete mythologies: they do not possess any substantial or natural quality as spiritual expressions of and by the universe itself. In his view, genuine myth refers to the original «event» of human language, to the endless and free creation of meaning «as the content of the word, not completely outside nor completely inside the word, but in the elaboration»²⁴. To the extent that for Kerényi myth is exclusively a «myth of the human being», his approach to myth is humanist²⁵.

Kerényi imagines genuine myth as an «island of man in nature» that is at the same time «threatened and corroded by various forms of human folly»²⁶. The modern masses increasingly refuse to enjoy the freedom and spontaneity of the human mythological condition, surrendering themselves instead to symbolic narratives presented by political enchanters as natural meaning or fate. These «technified» myths, instrumentalized for power-political or particularist purposes, destroy in Kerényi's view the disinterestedness and spontaneity of genuine myth-making, i.e. the condition that makes human beings human. Thus, technified myth corresponds in his view to death²⁷.

Kerényi therefore advocates for the «demythologization» of technified myth as a way to lead humanity back to the healthy, humanistic «source» (*sorgente*) of genuine myth²⁸. Yet he also believes that modern life has hampered this enterprise. Today, «before tasting of [mythology], we would do well to pause and consider [...]. We have to ask ourselves: is an immediate experience and enjoyment of mythology still in any sense possible?»²⁹. As Cavalletti has pointed out, «ordinary» modern human beings or «the masses» are for Kerényi easily tempted by simplified, appealing technified myths – in Jesi's terminology, to «ideas without words» – and have lost their bond with the genuine source of mythology. Only the mythologist and the artist who can retain a safe distance from modern massified

²³ K. Kerényi, «Dal mito genuino al mito tecnicizzato» in *Tecnica e casistica. Tecnica, escatologia e casistica*, ed. E. Castelli, Archivio di filosofia, Padova, Cedam 1964, pp. 154-156.

²⁴ Kerényi, «Dal mito genuino» cit., p. 157.

²⁵ Jesi, «Pensieri segreti» cit., p. 6.

²⁶ Kerényi, «Dal mito genuino» cit., p. 161.

²⁷ Ivi, pp. 155-56; A. Cavalletti, «Introduction» in *Spartakus* cit., pp. 3-5.

²⁸ Kerényi, «Dal mito genuino» cit., p. 156.

²⁹ K. Kerényi, «Prolegomena» in *Essays on a science of mythology. The myth of the divine child and the mysteries of Eleusis*, by K. Kerényi and C. G. Jung, trans. R. F. C. Hull, New York, Pantheon Books 1949, pp. 1-2.

political life can still think beyond the vulgarity of political myth. Therefore Kerényi believes that they, instead of false political enchanters, are the «genuine» guides of the erring masses, the humanist teachers who remain in touch with the original meaning of myth, and who inform «ordinary people» about the humanist value of the continuous re-interpretation of symbolic meaning³⁰.

For Kerényi, the modern mythologist or artist is thus to a certain extent «apolitical»: they can never reach the authentic meaning of mythological images and narratives by studying them instrumentally³¹. Their method is what he calls «*Ergriffenheit*», i.e. not the moment in which the mythologist grasps genuine myth or «truth», but the other way around: the moment of «the truth that chose me, and not I her», as Jesi writes in one of his essays on Kerényi³². Yet this *Ergriffenheit* does not designate a sudden epiphany of a natural mythic essence, but rather the realization that particular historical mythologies *cannot* be reduced to mythic essences since they are created by historically situated human beings. *Ergriffenheit* therefore denotes the mythologist's reflexivity to the symbolic in his environment, and his capacity to preserve an inner mental space within massified political life for the consciousness that mythic images do not express a mythic truth even when collectively shared. Yet precisely in this inner realization – in what Jesi calls his «secret thoughts»³³ – Kerényi discovers a *human* truth, the *genuine* source of mythology: that human beings are originally free to endlessly (re)create «myth». Thus «more wisdom than knowledge», *Ergriffenheit* is for Kerényi the intellectual's way to access «the immortality of mythology [...] and with that the immortality of the human being»³⁴.

As Jesi suggests, Kerényi's humanist opposition to technified myth is above all an individual responsibility. Kerényi's condition as an intellectual exiled both from his home country and his humanist peers indeed reflects the condition of the modern individual who needs to build and cultivate in his private «secret thoughts» a human «island» to escape the meaninglessness of the nature that surrounds him³⁵, and where he can take reflective distance from those who foolishly contin-

³⁰ Cavalletti, «Introduction» cit., pp. 3-5, 11.

³¹ Kerényi, «Prolegomena» cit., p. 2.

³² F. Jesi, «L'esperienza», in *Materiali mitologici* cit., p. 55.

³³ Jesi, «Pensieri segreti» cit., p. 3.

³⁴ Jesi, «L'esperienza» cit., pp. 55-62.

³⁵ Jesi, «Pensieri segreti» cit., pp. 19-20.

ue to *project* a mythic essence on nature. Yet despite this solitude, Jesi writes, for Kerényi this introspective approach to demythologization is not without hope and even forms a necessary step in the fight against technified myth, since it contains the utopian image of a society of self-reflective individuals, a «*res publica* of humanists», at a safe distance both from each other and from political myth yet joined in their withdrawal on their separate «islands of man in nature», in their humanist «secret thoughts»³⁶.

Initially, Jesi takes over both Kerényi's distinction between genuine and technified myth as well as his humanism. It is for this reason, he writes, that «Kerényi was never a fascist»³⁷. However, he also argues that Kerényi deforms the concept of «genuine myth» by opposing it to a concept of technified myth in which he has projected a *demonic* force of cosmic proportions³⁸. Indeed, when technified myth is believed to be *inevitably* and *essentially evil*, human beings are *forced* to reduce their space of genuine freedom to their inner world if they do not want to be vanquished by the «demon» of political myth. Thus, Jesi writes, a «*tristitia humanistarum* that draws on dissatisfaction, melancholy and solitude», is for Kerényi the *only* possibility for leading a genuine life, «a circle from which it is not possible to leave without entering immediately into the circle of death»³⁹.

For Jesi, then, Kerényi's individualist humanism is not an expression of freedom, but of fear: terrified of technified myth and its celebration of death and sacrifice, the humanist anxiously tries to exorcise it from within his individual «secret thoughts», the only place where the «immortal» bond with genuine humanist myth remains. Yet by demonizing political myth, Kerényi's attempt to escape the right-wing fascination with death is «in fact a subjection to death: a subjection, at least, to the threatening power of an enemy such as to pose itself as a necessary and constant vanishing point in the perspective of the living»⁴⁰. Kerényi's concept of the humanist mythology is in Jesi's view still tributary to a non-historical, non-linguistic and *non-human* «something»

³⁶ Ivi, p. 23.

³⁷ Jesi, «Il «mito dell'uomo»» in *Materiali mitologici* cit., p. 72.

³⁸ The relation between myth and the «demonic» is also an important theme in Jesi's *Secret Germany*. See A. Cavalletti, «Mythology and justice» in *Secret Germany. Myth in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, trans. R. Braude, Calcutta, Seagull Books 2021, pp. xviii-xxiii.

³⁹ Jesi, «Pensieri segreti» cit., pp. 30-31.

⁴⁰ Jesi, «L'esperienza» cit., p. 60.

by which it is fueled: a demonic «non-myth» that compels the humanist to warn for the terror lurking behind every attempt at creating a «genuine» political or collective alternative to technified myth. In other words, in Kerényi's framework, a non-human «essence» keeps justifying the shortcomings not of a fascist but of a bourgeois narrative, forcing human beings to sacrifice in the name of «human freedom» the possibility of any humanist alternative to the melancholic individualism and isolation of bourgeois culture.

As Jesi writes, this line of thought explains not only Kerényi's aversion to fascism but equally his «visceral and extremely violent» anticommunism⁴¹. Jesi indeed accuses his teacher of anxiously attempting to preserve his individual freedom and his privileged status as a bourgeois intellectual against increasing democratization and the growing power of the masses. Kerényi's antifascism and apparently hopeful defense and teachings of the humanist tradition are in his view nothing more than a moralistic «didactic and humanist mask»⁴² that do in fact not refer to the valuable «treasure» of the idea of «humanity» but behind which the intellectual primarily hides his melancholic despair and «secret fears» of (technified) myth⁴³. In this sense, Kerényi is in Jesi's view an *esoteric humanist* who «rescues» the concept of genuine myth to a «secret» space of introspective reflection, accessible only to the well-educated intellectual initiated in, or the artist inspired by, the «wordless idea» of Humanism. Yet for such a humanist, genuine myth is ultimately not a possibility for *this* world, in which meaning will always be vulgarly technified. The escape from finite history through (metaphorical) death thus remains his only *genuine* option. His defense against what he imagines as the «demon» of technified myth in fact nourishes it, forcing him to withdraw further and further on an ever-diminishing inner island of humanist wisdom – until nothing of it remains. Or as Jesi writes: «[t]eaching what mythology can truly be, Kerényi never denies the possibility for human beings of today to approach it except through death»⁴⁴. Death becomes the all-encompassing, totalizing norm by which to think and act. In this sense, although Jesi never accuses his teacher of being a

⁴¹ Jesi, «Mito dell'uomo» cit., p. 72.

⁴² Jesi, «Cesare Pavese, el mito y a la ciencia del mito» in *Literatura y mito*, Barcelona, Barral editores 1972, p. 155.

⁴³ Jesi, «Pensieri segreti» cit., p. 32.

⁴⁴ Jesi, «Cesare Pavese» cit., p. 155.

fascist, the latter's humanist mythology remains in the former's view subjected to the right-wing concept of *religio mortis*⁴⁵.

3. *The Religion of Death in Humanist Revolt*

Despite his critique of Kerényi's individualist, apolitical humanism, Jesi initially does not give up his teacher's distinction between genuine and technified myth but reworks it into a leftist and radically democratic response to right-wing culture. As Cavaletti points out⁴⁶, in *Myth and language of the collective* Jesi criticizes Kerényi's esoteric belief that human freedom as the genuine source of mythology is accessible only in the inner sphere of the intellectual's and the artist's «inspired» self-reflexivity⁴⁷. For Jesi, genuine myth can be genuine only to the extent to which it is truly *collective*. Although a historically situated mythology always risks being technified for elitist power-political purposes, it's not to be banned *in principle* from collective, political life. On the contrary, the moment of genuine myth, Jesi writes, corresponds to humanity's «waking state», as Martin Buber reads in a fragment of Heraclitus, in which «those who are awake have (contrary to those who sleep) a single cosmos in common, that is, a single world in which all participate together»⁴⁸. Humanity's freedom of myth-making can be free only when it is guarded by a linguistic structure, a *logos*, that is recognizable to *all* human beings and in which *all* human beings can participate⁴⁹.

For this reason, genuine myth can in Jesi's view never be enclosed within the private sphere of a particular psyche, but must be objectively and collectively accessible. This prevents both outright anti-humanist prejudices and subjective irrational fears from sneaking into the conception of genuine myth⁵⁰. Genuine myth is for Jesi rather the moment in which the powerless revolt against the symbolic images of the powerful, showing that they too form part of the collective of human beings capable of freely imagining their place in the universe

⁴⁵ For this reason, Jesi ultimately refers to Kerényi as a representative of European «right-wing culture»: Jesi, *Culture* cit., pp. 42-44.

⁴⁶ Cavaletti, «Introduction» cit., pp. 10-13.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 11-12.

⁴⁸ Jesi, «Mito y lenguaje de la colectividad» in *Literatura y mito* cit., p. 37.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 37-38.

⁵⁰ Ivi, pp. 39-43.

with a language that must be truly *common*⁵¹. He thus «exoterizes» (democratizes) the capacity of a genuine humanist «reflexive pause» that is in Kerényi's account primarily reserved for the intellectual or the poet. For this reason, Jesi initially refuses to define propaganda, i.e. the collective appeal to myth for political purposes, for example in revolt, as *automatically* a problematic technification of myth. While for the individualist, apolitical humanist, who places genuine myth in the private realm of individual consciousness, the political and especially propagandistic use of mythic images is almost synonym for «organized lying», for Jesi the criterium of a *collective* access to genuine myth implies that it *can* be objectivated in a «true propagandistic» language⁵². He therefore distinguishes between «those who revive images of myth moved by a profound and human social exigency, and those who, on the contrary, use myth only in order to put in practice their criminal objectives»⁵³. In other words, as long as mythic images are created and shared by a *true* collectivity in order to serve the interest of even the most powerless human beings, and as long as they do not reflect either subjective irrational fears or criminal purposes of particular groups, a humanist «technification» of myth can for Jesi be truly genuine, and serve humanistic progress⁵⁴.

Jesi elaborates these ideas in his philosophical reflection on the Spartakus revolt of 1919, which ended in the reinforcement of the status quo and the murder of its major protagonists. Contrary to the general tendency to qualify this revolt unambiguously as a revolutionary failure, Jesi interprets the events more nuancedly: both as an instance of a genuine humanist evocation of myth as well as of the dangers inherently tied to such an evocation. For Jesi, the Spartakus events show how in revolt, the exploited masses rise up against and unmask the «naturalized» symbols and mythological narratives of the bourgeois state and culture as technified expressions in the interest of a power relation. Revolt thus destroys the continuity between the mythology of the powerful and the mythic past that legitimates these power narratives. Yet contrary to a revolution, which *constructs* in actual history an alternative mythological project to bourgeois symbology and thus re-

⁵¹ For the link between the essay «Myth and language of the collective» and Jesi's analysis of revolt, see Cavalletti, «Introduction» cit., pp. 10-13.

⁵² Jesi, *Spartakus* cit., p. 38.

⁵³ Jesi, «Mito y lenguaje de la colectividad» cit., p. 44.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 46.

mains «wholly and deliberately immersed in historical time», revolt is primarily an act of *demythologization*⁵⁵: «the symbols of enemy power become so hostile and repugnant as to appear far more as an object to destroy than as one to appropriate»⁵⁶. Revolt shows the *emptiness* in the symbols of the powerful and thus constitutes not an alternative to but «the hyperbole of the bourgeois world pushed to the point of its overcoming»⁵⁷. It is precisely this destructive moment that constitutes for Jesi a *genuine* moment of «mythical epiphany»: it throws «interferences of extra-temporal truth» into historical time⁵⁸. This «truth», however, is not substantive or affirmative: it is the sudden and public realization of the exploited – an «instant of knowledge» – that the *absence* of any natural justification for the powerful symbols and mythology makes them, as human beings, able to intervene in the symbolic structures that define their place in society⁵⁹.

In a way, Jesi's conception of revolt as an «instant of knowledge» forms the collective counterpart to Kerényi's concept of *Ergriffenheit*: a moment of «pause» (or, as Jesi writes, a «suspension of historical time») in which the «truth grasps the insurgents and not the insurgents the truth»⁶⁰. Indeed, like Kerényi imagines humanist myth as an «island of humanity in nature», Jesi too thinks that genuine myth in revolt creates an «island» of human freedom in the realm of silent nature and technified myth. Yet contrary to Kerényi, Jesi refuses the idea that this island must remain in the private sphere of inner consciousness. In his view, it can become an *actual* space of genuinely *collective* human freedom, enhanced by «genuine propaganda» and safeguarded by barricades, in the otherwise oppressive and lonely space of the city. This island of revolt, then, becomes «the symbolic space common to an entire collective, the shelter from historical time in which the collective finds safety» and where «[e]veryone experiences the epiphany of the same symbols». In revolt, indeed, every member of the exploited group symbolizes reality in the same humanist way, which makes this symbolic experience truly genuine: «[t]he clash of the revolt distils the symbolic components of the ideology that has put the strategy in motion and only these are truly

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 140.

⁵⁸ All previous citations: Ivi, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 82.

⁶⁰ As he defined *Ergriffenheit* in Jesi, «L'esperienza» cit., p. 55.

perceived by the combatants»⁶¹. Thus, Jesi writes, revolt should be understood not as a strategic maturation of a *particular* (class) consciousness, but as a «maturation of *human* consciousness»⁶². The experience of revolt allows the collective of human beings to experience the city as «[their] *own* city», in itself empty of any symbolic meaning or necessity but precisely for this reason a space for radical intervention and experimentation⁶³. In this sense, Jesi's approach to myth remains humanist.

Yet paradoxically, in the *Spartakus* book Jesi also questions the possibility of a collective form of genuine humanist myth. Indeed, for Jesi, even the most genuine propagandic recourse to myth in the name of humanist progress ultimately risks succumbing to «reactionary element[s]»⁶⁴, since even in the revolutionary acts of *demythologization* human beings cannot escape projecting collectively shared but finite *images* on the empty place of myth. These images, then, can always overpower them and determine their actions again: the genuine evocation of myth in revolt thus risks a new technification of myth. Indeed, during revolt, the insurgents experience and characterize the symbols of the powerful not as simply devoid of meaning but as *hostile*. Yet since the «mythic» moment of revolt suspends historical-ideological particularities, these hostile symbols also gain in their experience a more-than-historical, mythic-demonic dimension that threatens not only the insurgents as a particular group but humanity as such: «the adversary of the moment truly becomes *the enemy*»⁶⁵. By *demonizing* the mythic images they aim to destroy as dark cosmic forces, Jesi writes, these images in fact continue to haunt the collective and to dominate their actions rather than the other way around: «the monster has the fearsome faculty of determining the formation of its own myth»⁶⁶. In other words, the insurgents come to conceive of their revolt and possible death as moral necessities, required in the «inevitable» struggle against «cosmic evil», rather than interventional possibilities or freely chosen action against a purely *historical* enemy. Their possible revolt and death become conceived as tragic sacrifices in the name of the victory over the powerful, even though they may

⁶¹ All previous citations: Jesi, *Spartakus* cit., p. 53.

⁶² Jesi, *Spartakus* cit., p. 142.

⁶³ Ivi, pp. 53-54.

⁶⁴ Jesi, «Mito y lenguaje de la colectividad» cit., p. 44.

⁶⁵ Jesi, *Spartakus* cit., p. 53.

⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 90.

know that, strategically speaking, the historical circumstances for their revolt are unfavorable⁶⁷.

Moreover, since genuine revolt aims at destroying not a particular technification of myth but technification *as such* (mythic technification is «*the enemy*»), and since the insurgents recur themselves, as finite historical beings, to propagandic technification of myth for their humanist-revolutionary purposes, they feel ultimately compelled to destroy the «demonic» forces of the historical technification of myth even in themselves in order to keep the revolt genuine. From this point of view, the «mythic truth» of human freedom experienced on their «island» of revolt can last only through that revolt's self-destruction as an *historical* event. Unable to accept the limits of their *mythological* condition that results in ever-finite technifications of mythic images, «tired of [t]he sufferings imposed by history», the insurgents desperately search «for a bond with eternity that would have nothing to do with death», i.e. with finitude⁶⁸. Paradoxically, they find this «saving» instance in *humanist* «ideas without words», which they «rescue» to the mythic, eternal time of death. In order to defend and renew «Humanity» and «Freedom», then, they are not only prepared to fight but ultimately also to *die* as finite human beings. For these wordless ideas, indeed, they are «ready to “risk [their] soul”»⁶⁹.

Thus, Jesi writes, even a collective humanist revolt against right-wing culture seems «not so much to vanquish the demonic adversary as to counter it with heroic victims. At its core, revolt is the most visible self-destructive form of human sacrifice»⁷⁰. Demonizing the enemy as the representative of the «cosmic evil» of myth, the insurgents actually feed myth rather than combating it. Consequently, the «island of human freedom» created in the city shrinks until it no longer exists actually, but only virtually in the inner, melancholic sphere of collective memory and of the remembrance of the revolt's *victims*. Like in a right-wing *religio mortis*, it is ultimately in the totalizing illusion of a «soteriological» power of *death* and *sacrifice* that such a victory of humanism lies: it takes the form not of the «the suppression

⁶⁷ Ivi, pp. 81-82. On the danger of recurring to myth in revolt in Jesi's *Spartakus*, see also K. Aarons, *Cruel Festivals: Furio Jesi and the Critique of Political Autonomy* in «Theory and Event», Vol. 22, No. 4, October 2019, pp. 1018-46, esp. pp.1026-1028.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 153.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 38.

⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 82.

of the enemy» but only of «his moral annihilation, placing a mirror before him, making him stand face-to-face with the heroic victims»⁷¹. Such a moral victory, however, does not pose a real historical danger to right-wing culture. When humanist insurgents are unable to escape the illusion that historical being contains «something» at its «more-than-historical» core, they fall into the trap of the mythological machine, requiring their sacrifices and death in order to guarantee the eternal victory of humanity over myth.

4. Conclusion: Towards a Possible Humanism

According to Jesi, both individualist and collective forms of humanist resistance against right-wing culture risk being trapped in a «religion of death» when they believe that the only possibility of a genuinely humanist victory lies in their *historical defeat* against an historically «inevitable» right-wing culture. Yet the fact that Jesi tries to unmask this cunning of the mythological machine in a humanist mythology also suggests that his *critique* of humanism is, ultimately, not an absolute *refusal* of it. It must rather be understood in a «Kantian» sense: it delimitates the conditions of possibility of a humanism that can effectively fight (political) myth instead of falling prey to the *religio mortis* of the enemy.

Humanism's major condition of possibility lies for Jesi in its ability to fearlessly face its own historical finitude and fallibility and its courage to resist the temptation to seek refuge in an «eternal», ahistorical concept of human freedom or myth's *non-existence*. Indeed, when humanists demonize the void of the mythological machine that makes *all* (even the humanist) historical mythologies «empty» and dangerous, mythological finitude gains for them a threatening outlook that they must *exorcize*. This demonization of mythic «emptiness», then, destroys their human freedom, which is expressed precisely in their imaginative capacity to (re)create ever finite mythologies. History thus becomes, in humanists' experience, a space of *non-possibility* where no human mythology can be imagined without immediately risk technification for antidemocratic, anti-liberal purposes. From this point of view, only (collective) suicide,

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 89

the escape from historical time, promises them an eternal victory of human freedom over myth.

Yet Jesi's focus on the moment of *demythologization* also suggests that there is another approach to humanism. Indeed, instead of negating myth, humanism could also *affirm* myth's empty place as a space in which no natural order can impede the free imagination of and humanist experimentation with finite symbolic images and projects. From this point of view, the absence of any either mythic or humanist «bond with eternity» is acknowledged as the *starting point* of humanism: the *condition* that allows human beings to take up their mythological capacity and to intervene in the (re)creation of mythologies. Although I cannot fully unpack this here, I believe that this difference in approach to the empty space of myth could be linked to Jesi's statement, in his essay on Rimbaud's «Bateau Ivre», that there is «an important difference» between «negating [myth] in order to deny» – or saying that myth «*is not* [It. *non è*]» and «negating [myth] in order to affirm» – or saying that myth «*not-is there* [It. *ci non-è*]». ⁷² While in the former formulation of denial a *non-entity* is still projected on the core of the mythological machine commanding human beings' actions, in the latter formulation, the demonstrative adverb «there» (*ci*) indicatively opens up a space where human beings can freely intervene in history, making a truly historical victory over myth *possible* (although never guaranteed).

It is this task of self-critically and nuancedly delimitating the conditions of possibility of a *historical* humanist victory over myth that Jesi leaves for today's humanists in their struggle against contemporary forms of right-wing culture.

Abstract

Recently, the increase of a cultural and political «new right» has sparked international interest in Jesi's work on right-wing culture and political myth. Less attention has been dedicated, however, to his critique of humanist opposition to myth, nonetheless a guiding thread in his thought. In this paper, I argue that, in Jesi's view, humanism fails when it is driven by the fear of political myth. In his critical essays on

⁷² F. Jesi, «A Reading of Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre"» in *Time and Festivity* cit., pp. 41-42.

Kerényi and in his book on the symbology of revolt, he critiques both individualistic, apolitical and collective, revolutionary forms of humanist opposition against right-wing culture for their inability to escape the right's «religion of death». For Jesi, they thus forsake the possibility of a *historical* victory of humanism over myth in favor of the moral *eternity* of a victory of victims over the «evil» of politics.

Recentemente, l'apparizione di una «nuova destra» culturale e politica ha suscitato un interesse internazionale per il lavoro di Jesi sulla cultura di destra e il mito politico. Per contro, meno attenzione è stata dedicata alla sua critica dell'opposizione umanista al mito, che tuttavia costituisce un filo conduttore nel suo pensiero. In questo articolo sostengo che, secondo Jesi, l'umanesimo fallisce quando è guidato dalla paura del mito politico. Nei suoi saggi critici su Kerényi e nel suo libro sulla simbologia della rivolta, Jesi critica sia le forme individualistiche e apolitiche sia quelle collettive e rivoluzionarie di opposizione umanista alla cultura di destra, perché non riescono a sottrarsi alla «religione della morte» della destra. Rinunciano così alla possibilità di una vittoria storica dell'umanesimo sul mito a favore dell'eternità morale di una vittoria delle vittime sul «male» politico.

Keywords: Right-wing culture, *religio mortis*, Myth, Karl Kerényi, Humanism, Revolt.

Parole chiave: Cultura di destra, *religio mortis*, mito, Karl Kerényi, umanesimo, rivolta.