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“UNE RÉALITÉ PLUS RÉELLE QUE LE RÉEL”: THE PERSISTENCE OF MYTH IN POSTWAR FRENCH AND ITALIAN FICTION

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Abstract
Interwar Europe was enamored of myth: adaptations of classical tales proliferated, anthropological research into so-called “primitive” mythology thrived, and movements ranging from psychoanalysis to surrealism bore myth's undeniable imprint. But its reputation took a turn during World War II, and by the end of the war, myth had become synonymous with irrationality, violence, barbarism, and (most damning of all) fascism. At best, myth was dismissed as anachronistic or escapist; at worst, it was cited it as a serious political threat. Thus, most postwar European writers, especially those claiming to be politically “committed,” eschewed myth in order to avoid the threat of contamination. However, there are exceptions to this rule—writers who strived to maintain connections with past traditions, as myth once had, without falling victim to propaganda or neo-romantic universalization. Taking as my starting point myth's tremendous capacity to facilitate social cohesion, I argue that it played a vital role in postwar French and Italian fiction, providing readers with the tools needed to process the trauma of the war, combat modern alienation and disenchantment, and engage with the sociopolitical exigencies of the day. This dissertation thus re-inscribes myth in a tradition of political commitment, tracing the (non-fascistic) political consequences of mythically inflected novels. This rehabilitation of myth hinges on four authors—Georges Bataille and Claude Simon in France, and Cesare Pavese and Elsa Morante in Italy—who mobilized myth as an alternative to the dominant literary and political models operative in each country. However, I do not merely demonstrate the persistence of mythological archetypes in the postwar cultural landscape; rather, I articulate the precise ways in which such archetypes interpenetrated the specificity of World War II and subverted traditional historiography. Far from being a form of escapist fantasy, myth allowed writers and readers alike to appropriate longstanding cultural traditions in order to circumscribe the otherwise uncontrollable and unassimilable experiences of war. Though many intellectuals advocated for myth's outright demise, the authors considered here sought to recover something from contaminated discourses, recognizing that total rupture from the past would only exacerbate existing feelings of alienation, isolation, and despair.

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To the old gods and the new.
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They say it takes a village to raise a child. This is doubly true for a mewling dissertation babe. My project wouldn’t have been possible without a vast kinship network that has supported both my scholarship and (even more importantly) the oft-neglected non-scholarly facets of life. First, to my fellow graduate students (both former and current): George MacLeod, Mike Edwards, Adam Geroni-Cutchin, Tom Tearney, Gabriel Sessions, Clara Wagner, Allan Madin, Maya Vinokour, Kate Aid, Samuel Martin, Bronwyn Wallace, Pavel Khazanov, Julia Dasbach, Lucy Swanson, Romain Delaville, Sarah Suther-Bee, Alex Moshkin, and Arabella Hobbs. You pored over drafts, shared beers, tears, and conference hotel rooms, patiently listened to rambling, half-formed ideas, offered unflagging encouragement, and made me the person I am today. Brooke Owens, Jack Grauer, Ian Thake, and Ralph Geroni-Cutchin: you helped keep me grounded and reminded me that there’s a big, beautiful world beyond academia. Matt Johnson, Ian Petrie, and Lillyrose Veneziano Broccia: thank you for being incredible mentors and for teaching me how satisfying teaching can be. To my mother, who, even when she had no idea what I was talking about, always nodded enthusiastically. To my sister, whose incomparable cupcakes sustained me in my darkest hours. To JoAnne Dubil, without whom none of us would have survived year one. And to everyone who passed through my life over the last seven years, however fleeting our encounter: thank you.
ABSTRACT

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Interwar Europe was enamored of myth: adaptations of classical tales proliferated, anthropological research into so-called “primitive” mythology thrived, and movements ranging from psychoanalysis to surrealism bore myth’s undeniable imprint. But its reputation took a turn during World War II, and by the end of the war, myth had become synonymous with irrationality, violence, barbarism, and (most damning of all) fascism. At best, myth was dismissed as anachronistic or escapist; at worst, it was cited it as a serious political threat. Thus, most postwar European writers, especially those claiming to be politically “committed,” eschewed myth in order to avoid the threat of contamination. However, there are exceptions to this rule—writers who strived to maintain connections with past traditions, as myth once had, without falling victim to propaganda or neoromantic universalization. Taking as my starting point myth’s tremendous capacity to facilitate social cohesion, I argue that it played a vital role in postwar French and Italian fiction, providing readers with the tools needed to process the trauma of the war, combat modern alienation and disenchantment, and engage with the sociopolitical exigencies of the day. This dissertation thus re-inscribes myth in a tradition of political commitment, tracing the (non-fascistic) political consequences of mythically inflected novels. This
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction.</strong> Whatever Happened to Myth?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 1.</strong> Myth Takes Root: Pavese’s Politics of Place</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 2.</strong> Headless, Not Heartless: Bataillean Politics After Acéphale</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 3.</strong> No Fantasy, Just Things: Simon’s Politics of Experimentation</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4.</strong> “Once Upon a Time There Was an S.S.”: Politics from Inside the Fairy Tale Chamber</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion.</strong> The Death (and Resurrection?) of Myth</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography.</strong></td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Introduction**

**Whatever Happened to Myth?**

Every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural, healthy creativity. Only a horizon ringed about with myths can unify a culture. The forces of imagination and of Apollonian dream are saved only by myth from indiscriminate rambling. The images of myth must be the daemonic guardians, ubiquitous but unnoticed, presiding over the growth of the child’s mind and interpreting to the mature man his life and struggles.

–Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

…comme s’il avait abandonné, renoncé au spectacle de ce monde pour retourner son regard, le concentrer sur une vision intérieure plus reposante que l’incessante agitation de la vie, une réalité plus réelle que le réel.

–Claude Simon, *La Route des Flandres*

The word “myth” boasts some serious baggage. Though it has inspired an eclectic array of thinkers over the centuries, from medieval mystics to Renaissance painters to Modernist novelists, European interest in myth reached a fever pitch during the interwar period. In France, the resurgence of Greek mythology was in part an homage to the classical tradition of the Grand Siècle, and in part a reminder of humanist traditions that seemed in danger of extinction after World War I. Anthropological interest in non-Western mythologies likewise flourished during this era, and European artists frequently borrowed from these “irrational” and “primitive” traditions.¹ Whether symbolizing order or chaos, collective effervescence or the individual unconscious, myth was on everyone’s

¹ The mythically inflected works produced during this period are far too numerous to name. However, to cite merely a few examples, Cocteau, Gide, Giraudoux, Yourcenar, and Valéry all penned adaptations of Greek myths. Inspired in part by the anthropological investigations of Durkheim and his inheritors, and in part by psychoanalysis, painters like Dalí, Ernst, and Masson included mythological archetypes in their visual art. In Italy, the hermetic poetry of the 1920s and 30s, while rejecting complicated allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, nonetheless found inspiration in mystical traditions.
mind. But World War II fundamentally altered the perception of myth: reduced to a reviled tool of fascist manipulation, it more or less disappeared from the intellectual landscape.

The links between Nazism and mythology have been well documented.² Hitler and Goebbels mobilized völkisch mysticism, folklore, and “organic” communities in order to strengthen the Nazi Party’s popular support. Alfred Rosenberg, one of the party’s principle ideologues, penned The Myth of the Twentieth Century in 1930, influenced by the mythic theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Wager, Arthur Schopenhauer, Meister Eckhart, and Georges Sorel, among others. In Italy, Mussolini went so far as to establish a School of Fascist Mysticism, which embraced the non-rational elements of fascism and positioned Mussolini as an infallible god-like figure. In a more general sense, both Hitler and Mussolini leaned heavily on national myths to inspire their adherents and glorify the notion of sacrificial death. Hitler relied on myths of racial purity—with some theories even claiming the Germans were descended from Atlantis—while Mussolini favored myths of the Roman Empire’s global domination, which he promised to recreate.³ Key gestures and symbols—from the fascist salute to the swastika—were borrowed from earlier mythological traditions.

Thus, by the end of World War II, myth was inextricably linked to fascist ideology. It had been used to justify imperial expansion, racial exclusion, and patriarchal social values, which in turn led many postwar European writers, especially those

² See, for example, Jay W. Baird, The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda 1939-45 (1975).
³ To cite merely one example, Mussolini proclaimed in 1922: “Rome is our starting point and reference; it is our symbol, or, if you will, our myth. We dream about the Roman Italy, that is, the wise and strong, disciplined and imperial Italy. Much of what was the immortal spirit of Rome is reborn in fascism: the lictor is Roman, our organization of combat is Roman, our pride and our courage are Roman: ‘Civis romanus sum’” (qtd. Giardiana 57).
claiming to be politically “committed,” to steer clear of myth and its propagandistic powers.4 “Myth” meant irrationality, violence, and barbarism. Among Marxist writers, mythology was a particularly offensive concept, not only because of its fascist connections, but also due to the belief that it was a tool of the bourgeoisie used to mask the true conditions of labor.5 Between neorealist impulses in Italy, Sartre’s push for littérature engagée in France, and growing resistance to “official” narratives of the war (which often mythologized the role of resistance movements while ignoring the realities of collaboration), the postwar period was indelibly marked by the project of demythification.6 At best, myth was dismissed as anachronistic or escapist; at worst, it was cited as a serious political threat.7

However, there are exceptions to this rule—writers who strived to create paths to the past, as mythology once had, without falling victim to propaganda or neo-romantic universalization (two indictments commonly leveled against myth). Taking as my starting

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4 As David Gross laments in his defense of Georges Sorel’s writings on myth, “historical events since Sorel’s time have made one think that any interest in myth or its psychological underpinnings must necessarily have fascist overtones” (114).
5 Commodity fetishism, for example, is described by Marx in quasi-mythological terms. In Mythologies (1957), Roland Barthes exposes numerous cultural myths, advertisements, and pop culture phenomena as vehicles through which bourgeois society asserts its values.
6 In The Vichy Syndrome (1991), Henry Rousso defines “the myth of the Resistance,” or résistancialisme, as a consciously cavalier interpretation of les années noires that dismissed Vichy as the creation of a small group of misguided men, placed the blame for any war crimes solely on the Germans and on very small bands of collaborationists, and exaggerated the level of resistance of the average Frenchman.
7 As is the case in any historical or literary investigation, the line separating the pro-myth period from the anti-myth one is fuzzy. Jean Anouilh and Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, continued to use Greek mythology as an allegory for contemporary political situations well into the 1940s, with Antigone and Les Mouches, respectively. Jean Cocteau released his film Orphée in 1950 and Le Testament d’Orphée in 1960. However, though myths continued to appear in art after the war, I maintain that the relationship between myth and politics was nonetheless fundamentally altered. For example, the use of mythology during the Occupation was seen as a necessary screen to avoid censorship, but did not play a central role in leftist ideology. Cocteau’s cinematic adaptations of myth were praised for their aesthetic qualities, but were not considered “politically engaged.” Furthermore, as I explain later in this introduction, I am less interested in specific mythological traditions (e.g. Greek) than in a mythic literary methodology featured in certain postwar novels.
point myth’s tremendous capacity to facilitate social cohesion, I argue that it played a vital role in postwar French and Italian fiction, providing readers with the tools needed to process the trauma of the war, combat modern alienation and disenchantment, and engage with the sociopolitical exigencies of the day. To illustrate this theory, I rely on four case studies: Georges Bataille and Claude Simon in France, and Cesare Pavese and Elsa Morante in Italy. Though at first glance these authors represent wildly different aesthetic and political commitments, I maintain that each ultimately mobilized myth as a (non-fascistic) form of political engagement and alternative to the dominant literary models operative in each country.

One of the biggest challenges to such a rehabilitation is the tendency to read myth in purely Manichean terms. In their introduction to the volume *Re-enchantment of the World*, Joshua Landy and Michael Saler identity two main theoretical frameworks through which enchantment has historically been read: a binary approach, which views enchantment as a relic to be swept away by the superior tenets of Enlightenment rationality, and a dialectical approach, which posits that modernity itself is enchanted, unbeknown to its subjects, in a deceptive and dangerous way.\(^8\) However, they insist on the existence of a third form that is neither escapist, nor irrational, nor reactionary. According to this approach, which they term antinomial, enchantment is voluntary (rather than insidiously imposed) and respectable (meaning compatible with secular rationality). It “delights but does not delude” (3). I argue that it is this third form that is deployed by Pavese, Bataille, Simon, and Morante.

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\(^8\) For our purposes, we can consider enchantment to be a synonym for myth.
Joseph Mali posits a similar idea in his work on Walter Benjamin, referring to a critical methodology whose main aim is to “counter both the ‘disenchantment’ of mythology in modern scientific ideologies (e.g. futurism or Marxism) and the ‘re-enchantment’ of mythology in neoromantic ideologies (e.g. surrealism or Fascism)” (239). Myth is indeed susceptible to instrumentalization by both detractors and adherents. For those opposed to myth, it can quickly become a symbol of all modern evil; for those in favor, it can inspire naïve nostalgia for an idealized past. What Mali, Landy, and Saler suggest, and what I will attempt to demonstrate, is that myth needn’t be reduced to such simplistic, dichotomous terms. There’s another way.

Far from being a form of escapist fantasy, myth allows writers and readers alike to appropriate longstanding cultural traditions in order to circumscribe the otherwise uncontrollable and unassimilable experiences of World War II. Furthermore, myth, one of whose primary functions has always been creating social cohesion, helps individuals to reconnect with historical, cultural, and/or religious communities often thought lost following the unprecedented rupture of World War II. Finally, given the alienation characteristic of postwar industrialization, myth emerges as a means of resurrecting forgotten lines of communication and thereby overcoming modernity’s hallmark isolation. In short, myth combines the social investments of Marxism with a validation of certain “anachronistic” aspects of prewar culture.

My goal is not simply to highlight the oft-overlooked persistence of mythological archetypes in the postwar cultural landscape, but rather to reveal the precise ways in which such archetypes interpenetrated the specificity of the experience of World War II and were mobilized as a means of engaging with the sociopolitical exigencies of the
postwar period. All of the authors under consideration were marginalized in some way due to their failure to adhere to dominant modes of political engagement, yet I argue that theirs is simply an alternative means of engagement rather than an outright rejection of political action. In this, I agree with Daniel Just’s assessment that the choice “between, on the one hand, an engaged literature of density, concreteness, and representation, and, on the other hand, a depoliticized and de-contextualized literature for its own sake” is a false dilemma (16). The postwar literary landscape was more nuanced than many scholars give it credit for. Critics accuse myth of being detached from political realities, but, to quote Claude Simon, it may ultimately offer a reality more real than the real.

Before justifying my choice of myth as the operative word in this project (a polemical choice, given its negative connotations), it is first necessary to take a brief journey through the major literary and political trends of the postwar era. This is well-trodden territory, to be sure, but in order to understand the antagonistic reception of myth during the time period I consider—roughly 1945-1975—as well as the mistrust of the myth/politics pairing, we must situate myth in relation to the other theories, ideologies, and artistic strategies advocated by prominent postwar French and Italian intellectuals.

**Les trente glorieuses and il miracolo economico**

At first glance, it would seem that France and Italy occupied very different positions during World War II. After all, Italy was an Axis power, France an Ally. Italy labored under the yoke of fascism for twenty years; France endured a mere four years of
occupation. And yet, towards the end of the war, their experiences began to converge. The efforts of the Résistance were mimicked by the Italian partigiani; the demarcation line separating occupied France from the zone libre was mirrored by the line dividing a liberated Southern Italy (following the Allied landing in Sicily) from the north, still controlled by the Republic of Salò. Simultaneously victor and vanquished, subjugator and subjugated, France and Italy were forced to negotiate numerous conflicting identities, which culminated in the impossible postwar task of separating collaborators from the “true patriots.”

Without claiming any sort of false equivalency, France and Italy in many ways followed similar trajectories after the war. Both nations, for example, sought to articulate the ideal relationship between literature and politics, and to establish the role of intellectuals within the political arena. The Communists—who, thanks in large part to their role in resistance and partisan movements, enjoyed immense popularity in the immediate postwar period—settled on a path right away: both the French and Italian branches of the party fell in line with Soviet policy, as articulated by Central Committee Secretary Andrei Zhdanov, which stated that art should be anti-bourgeois, anti-individualistic, and anti-formalistic. Lynn Higgins explains that, “a good communist

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9 Graham Bartram reminds us of “a basic difference between the French and the Italian experiences of Fascism. The Vichy regime, relatively short-lived and installed as a puppet of the Nazi occupiers, could, with a modicum of plausibility, be construed after its demise as a brief and indeed ‘alien’ intrusion into the continuity of la république française. Whilst Mussolini’s Salò Republic of 1943-45, against which the partisans fought, had also been imposed by the Nazi invader, the preceding Fascist regime with which it possessed an undeniable continuity was neither short-lived nor an alien intrusion. It was therefore much harder to defend the lofty view, expressed by the liberal-humanist philosopher Benedetto Croce after 1945, that Fascism had been a mere ‘parenthesis’ in Italian history” (23).

10 These debates, of course, predate World War II. However, the intensity of the postwar crisis brought renewed urgency to the question of intellectuals’ ethical responsibilities.
writer was expected to write fiction that was clear and widely accessible; it should steer a
neat path amid the confusions of real life, aim for immediate and transparent political
efficacy and utility, and portray the Truth” (12). In practice, this doctrine often meant that
Communist writers were obliged to pen whatever the Soviet leadership decreed
necessary, placing them in the subservient position of propagandists. Of course, not every
leftist intellectual was a doting Communist; nonetheless, the overarching sentiment was
that committed intellectuals had a duty to use their literary works to guide the masses
toward revolution and social equality

Sartre was unquestionably the dominant intellectual voice in France in the decade
after the war; thanks to him, Marxism and existentialism became the leading philosophies
of the day. Dissatisfied with the tenets of Zhdanovism, Sartre imagined a different
(though equally “political”) role for the writer in Qu’est-ce que la littérature? (1947)
First published as a series of essays in Les Temps modernes, and later as a collected
volume, it is here that Sartre laid out his vision of the writer’s responsibility and
popularized the term littérature engagée. “Committed literature” is founded on a basic
existentialist tenet: that a person defines himself by consciously engaging in willed
action. As applied to literature, this means opposition to the creed of “art for art’s sake”
and a rejection of bourgeois writers, whose obligation is to their craft rather than their
audience. Though later critics sometimes interpreted littérature engagée as a dogmatic
demand for adherence to a particular political ideology, Sartre understood engagement as
an individual moral challenge to adapt freely made choices to socially useful ends. At its
core, the text merely communicates that artists can no longer in good conscience ignore
their historical situatedness. This vision of committed literature influenced a generation
of writers—even if very little actual “literature” was produced under the auspices of this doctrine.\(^\text{11}\)

In Italy, meanwhile, the late 1940s witnessed the end of philosopher Benedetto Croce’s reign, while Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci came to the fore, particularly following the publication of the first volume of his prison writings in 1947. Neorealism dominated cinematic (and, to a slightly lesser extent, literary) production. Though the movement was by no means homogenous, it was first and foremost invested in the notion of *impegno*, or commitment, and sought to represent the harsh realities of poverty, oppression, and injustice. During this period, debates regarding the role of the intellectual centered around writer Elio Vittorini’s very public break with Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti; while Togliatti followed the official Soviet party line, Vittorini refused to be a piper of the revolution [“suonare il piffero della rivoluzione”]. He argued in favor of a new culture, one capable of combatting and eventually eliminating suffering, rather than playing a merely consolatory role.\(^\text{12}\) Like Sartre, he advanced these aims as editor of a major journal (*Il Politecnico*) and was soon considered the standard-bearer of committed literature in Italy.

Eager to prove their Resistance or partisan credentials—and feeling guilty, perhaps, that they had not done more to oppose fascism during the war—these thinkers’ engagements with the literary world were not merely intellectual or aesthetic. On the contrary, culture became the battleground for political dominance (especially after the

\(^{11}\) Instead, most of the more militantly political writers were busy publishing essays in journals—including *Les temps modernes*—as a means of advancing their social and political agendas.

\(^{12}\) In the inaugural issue of *Il Politecnico*, he writes: “Non piú una cultura che consoli nelle sofferenze ma una cultura che protegga dalle sofferenze, che le combatta e le elimini.”
Communists were officially ousted from government in 1947). An obsession with “commitment,” then, was the main determiner of literary production in the first decade after the war. It probably goes without saying that myth, almost invariably coded as either escapist or politically tainted, had a limited role to play in this committed realm.\(^{13}\)

Paradoxically (given the insistence on antifascist credentials), this was also the period of greatest amnesia regarding the war. Both France and Italy tried to enact systematic purges of fascist collaborators in the wake of liberation, but a need for national unity won out over the desire for vengeance, and many collaborators not only went unpunished, but were soon back in government. Rather than dwelling on a traumatic past, one of the primary coping mechanisms was to pursue a narrative of rupture: to avoid the stain of fascism, everything after the war would be constructed in opposition to what came before. In reality, there were numerous continuities between pre- and postwar culture in both France and Italy.\(^ {14}\) However, explicit evocations of the past were largely avoided. For example, though some Resistance narratives found purchase, many deportees struggled to secure publishers for their memoirs. Even Primo Levi’s *Se questo*...
è un uomo, arguably one of the most famous accounts of the concentration camps, was turned down by Einaudi. Giorgio Bassani, who penned numerous works about the exclusion and deportation of Jews in Italy—and who was arrested for antifascism in 1943—was accused of “turning the Fascist period into nothing more than personal memory, local colour, and historical background” (Gordon 205). Thus, victimization at the hands of the fascists was a necessary but ultimately insufficient credential for postwar writers. If some writers felt an ethical obligation to represent the atrocities of the war, the desire to simply forget the past in the name of a revolutionary future won out.

By the late 1950s, the Communist Party was in crisis. The circulation of Khrushchev’s secret speech criticizing Stalin, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and well-publicized accounts of life in the gulags led many intellectuals in both France and Italy to lose faith in the party. Concomitantly, both nations faced rapid industrialization and Americanization, due in no small part to the Marshall Plan and the United States’ desire to limit the power of the Communists in Western Europe. This in turn led to increased tensions between rural and urban environments. Though suspicious of Stalin’s increasingly totalitarian policies, most writers were equally dubious of the American push toward empty consumerism. The Cold War powers thus emerged as a true Scylla and Charybdis.

Furthermore, as faith in the Soviet Union (and its promised revolution) waned, writers were forced to confront new forms of violence—in particular, the Algerian War, which was both a decisive and a divisive event for the self-definition of many French

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15 Jacques Tati’s iconic film Mon Oncle, for example, which beautifully captures the dissonance between a rapidly disappearing old France and the new France of suburban houses filled with shiny appliances, was released in 1958.
intellectuals. Sartre mounted a vocal defense of Algerian independence; so devoted was he to the cause that he abandoned his notion of *littérature engagée* in favor of more direct political intervention, concluding that literature is ultimately an obstacle to action.

Camus, meanwhile, accused Sartre of blind, self-righteous activism driven by an abstract notion of history. What Camus proposed instead was that writers remain in touch with the era while simultaneously maintaining a certain distance from history. Other intellectuals soon staked out their positions in relation to these two opposing figures—though again, myth struggled to find purchase. It was somehow dismissed as both too proximate to, and too distant from, history.

In terms of dominant theoretical paradigms, by the late 1950s, Marxism, existentialism, and historicism had given way to structuralism, anthropology, and psychoanalysis; Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Anthropologie structurale*, for example, was published in 1958, followed by a more fully articulated theory of structuralism in his writings of the 1960s. Lévi-Strauss and his acolytes were, of course, deeply interested in myth, but only in a strictly ethnographic sense. The myths they studied were of indigenous peoples in far-off lands—not the myths that lingered in Western Europe.\(^\text{16}\)

Another key deployment of the term “myth” in this period can be found in Roland Barthes’ 1957 text *Mythologies*; in this collection of short essays analyzing the role of consumer goods and popular entertainment, he defines myth as a type of speech that distorts and impoverishes meanings by removing them from their historical context, making things appear natural that are not. Thus, thanks to Barthes, myth came to be

\(^{16}\) Even so, Lévi-Strauss’s theorization of “the savage mind” is useful in terms of understanding the relationship between *bricolage* and myth (which I discuss in more detail later).
associated not only with fascist irrationality, but also with bourgeois manipulation. In Italy, too, the late ’50s and early ’60s saw an opening out of intellectual horizons, with an eclectic mix of phenomenology, structuralism, sociology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology replacing the dominant Crocean or Gramscian philosophical idioms.

On the literary front, the late 1950s saw the birth of the *nouveau roman* and other avant-garde movements; Nathalie Sarraute’s *L’Ère du soupçon*, often considered a sort of “manifesto” of the *nouveau roman*, was published in 1956, followed by Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* in 1957, while the experimental group Oulipo was founded in 1960. In Italy as well, neorealism gave way to new forms—most notably Pasolini’s *neo-sperimentalismo* and the *neoavanguardia*. In general, the 1960s marked a turn towards formal experimentation and theory, in part as a response to the aforementioned commercialization of culture. Umberto Eco describes how, with the rise of consumerist mass culture, leftist intellectuals were often pushed into one of two extreme responses: either apocalyptic rejection or optimistic integration. Experimental writing represented an effort to break free from the oppressive traditions of the past—to “kill the father” in the pursuit of progress—without falling prey to the empty commercialization of American culture. As Daniele Fioretti explains, *neo-sperimentalismo* represented “an attempt to overcome the stalemate of the Italian culture. Only a true attempt to face the economic and social reality of neocapitalism could bring Italian literature out of the quagmire of naturalism” (9).

Sartre’s definition of *littérature engagée* sought to remove the indeterminacy of language, encouraging utilitarian, denotative prose, but subsequent writers intentionally

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17 See *Apocalittici e integrati: comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa* (1964).
exacerbated linguistic ambiguity, viewing instability as its own kind of political tool.  

Fearing that the avant-garde had become the establishment, writers were pushed toward ever-greater degrees of linguistic experimentation; the term *nouveau nouveau roman*, for example, was first bandied around in 1971. Yet myth continued to be excluded from this landscape; though its fascist reputation had faded slightly by the 1960s, the accusations of anachronism persisted. Associated with long-dead epochs, myth was deemed unfit to contend with modern cultural challenges.

1968, of course, was a watershed moment for politics. However, if the events of May ‘68 ultimately had little political effect in France—the Gaullist party emerged stronger than ever in the June elections—in Italy, the student and industrial unrest marked the beginning of a decade of extremism, terrorism, and social reform known as the *anni di piombo*, or Years of Lead. Between 1969 and 1981, nearly 2,000 murders were attributed to political violence in the form of bombings, assassinations, and street warfare between rival militant factions, culminating in the assassination of Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978 by the Red Brigades. Just as the Algerian War had disinterred memories of World War II for France—the use of torture against Algerian dissidents and de Gaulle’s sudden return to power bore undeniable echoes of the Resistance years—so too did the aftereffects of May ’68 involve the resurrection of partisan rhetoric. Some *sessantottini*, including the Red Brigades, called themselves *resistenti ad oltranza*, or permanent

\[18\] In his study of Barthes, Blanchot, Camus, and Duras, Daniel Just writes that, “Language is political precisely to the extent of being unstable. […] Against the literature of action and denotation defended by Sartre, these writers propose literature that is engaged because its mode of writing destabilizes the dominant conception of the self and the concomitant valorization of action” (2, 10).

\[19\] For a more thorough study of the link between the public memory of the Holocaust and decolonization, see Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009).
partisans, and framed their violence as the fulfillment of the (unsuccessful) anti-fascist battle that had begun some three decades earlier.

Indeed, the 1970s marked a renewal of interest in World War II, as well as a reconsideration of the “official” narratives that had been promulgated in the previous decades. Henry Rousso refers to this period in France as “the return of the repressed”—an era of demythification, defined by the desire, particularly among second-generation writers, to confront difficult truths about collaboration and complacency. Often grouped together under the term la mode rétro, key texts of these era include Marcel Ophül’s Le Chagrin et la pitié and the novels of Patrick Modiano. Opposition to résistancialisme, though praised by some for revealing painful but necessary historical facts, was dismissed by others as “fétichisme snob des effets de vieux (vêtements et décors) et dérision de l’histoire” (Bonitzer and Toubiana 5). Michel Foucault, among others, insisted that even if the idea of all Frenchmen participating in the Resistance was inaccurate, the new claim that all were collaborators was equally fallacious. Italian films like The Night Porter and Pasqualino Settebellezze likewise destabilized established narratives of partisan heroism, inviting praise for their artistic merits but condemnation for their exploitation of suffering. The incensed reactions elicited by these texts suggest that fascism remained an open wound.


21 Of course, it would be inaccurate to claim that all World War II-focused texts of this period had identical aims, or were received in the same manner. Henry Rousso, for example, identifies at least four categories of World War II-focused film directors in the 1970s: prosecutors, chroniclers, aesthetes, and opportunists. A film like Lilianna Cavanni’s The Night Porter, then, would be classified differently than Le Chagrin et la pitié.
history from myth proved a Sisyphean one, which often resulted not in the elimination of myth, but rather the creation of counter-myths.22

The vast majority of scholarship surveying the postwar period privileges the aforementioned trends: in France, Sartrean-dominated littérature engagée and the “experimental” writing of the nouveau roman, Oulipo, and later, Tel Quel; in Italy, neorealism, followed by the neo-avant-garde (with the occasional bestseller, like Lampedusa’s Il Gattopardo, thrown in for good measure). In both cases, leftist thinkers played a decisive role in determining the trajectory of cultural trends and articulating the ideal relationship between literature and politics.23 Though scholars acknowledge that there were artists working outside of these well-known frameworks, the dominant narratives nonetheless fail to account for alternative forms of committed literature, like myth. What I propose is that Pavese, Bataille, Simon, and Morante turned to myth as a means of pursuing leftist political ideals without jettisoning past traditions (as many avant-garde writers were quick to do); they refused to throw away the baby with the bathwater. In the ongoing battle between myth and reality, or myth and history, these authors adopted the unorthodox view that myth was the more ethically valid position to assume in relation to World War II.

22 As Rousso writes, “The danger was that one myth would be replaced by another, and indeed this was precisely what happened: the image of a France united in resistance was supplanted (wrongly, we can now say in all serenity) by the image of a France equally united in cowardice” (112).
23 This is not to say that the right was absent from these debates. For more on literary production amongst conservative postwar writers, see Nicholas Hewitt, Literature and the Right in Postwar France (1996). According to Hewitt, “An examination of these right-wing cultural traditions and their culmination in the postwar period serves also to remind us of the extent to which they have tended to be eclipsed by a particular cultural orthodoxy emanating from the Liberation, typified by the historical dominance of Existentialism, which has relegated to a secondary level patterns of evolution of at least an equal importance” (2).
Qu’est-ce que le mythe?

One of the difficulties of writing about myth is that the term is applied to a disturbingly wide swath of cultural attitudes and artifacts. The Greek word μῦθος (mythos) is most often translated simply as “story” or “report,” though the term has acquired an array of religious and social meanings over the millennia that far exceed such a purely narrative description. Even if we limit ourselves to definitions provided by relatively contemporary mythographers, contradictions emerge. For Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, myths are sacred histories; for Bronislaw Malinowski, they are pragmatic stories; Mircea Eliade calls them creation stories, while Claude Lévi-Strauss prefers the term “strongly structured stories”; Roland Barthes sees myth as a language (and one of political manipulation and propaganda), whereas Georges Sorel situates myth at the heart of revolutionary action. Myths can be sacred, political, or both. They can represent order and rationality, or chaos and violence. Perhaps most importantly, in common parlance the word has come to be synonymous with fiction, as against anthropological definitions that view myths as truthful accounts of events from the remote past.24

Then there’s the problem of adjectives. Does “mythical” mean the same thing as “mythological”? What about “mythic”? In his seminal work Mythology in the Modern Novel, J.J. White concludes that “mythical” usually refers to the presence of Jungian archetypes, though it can also be used as a synonym for “fanciful,” with all its attendant negative connotations. He views “mythic” (the term I favor in this project) as less pejorative than other adjectival forms. In French, there’s a preference for “mythologique”

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24 For more on myths as true stories, see Williams Bascom’s “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives” (1965) and Mircea Eliade’s Aspects du mythe (1963).
over “mythique,” though it’s unclear which term refers to specific mythological traditions and which to more general archetypes.

In order to clarify the particularities of my deployment of the word, it’s perhaps most useful to begin by stating what myth is not. By myth, I do not mean any particular mythological tradition—Greek, Roman, Sumerian, or otherwise. Nor do I refer to the creation of a new set of “modern” myths. I do not use myth in the Barthesian sense, nor in the anthropological sense of Lévi-Strauss or René Girard. And despite my investment in World War II as an essential touchstone for postwar intellectuals, I also don’t use “myth” as it was invoked during the demythification period: that is, to refer to the myth of the Resistance or the myth of de Gaulle. In such iterations, myth again becomes a form of propaganda, but one in service of the left rather than the right. In either case, opposition to myth stems from the feeling that it creates dangerously tidy narratives that ignore historical reality in favor of political expediency. However, as I explain in later chapters, the authors under consideration here used myth precisely to undermine these monolithic, collective memories of the war, drawing attention instead to marginalized characters and peripheral stories. For the purposes of this project, then, myth is neither a set of enduring archetypes, nor a collection of religious beliefs. Instead, I present myth as a methodology; a mode of cognition; a sort of Weltanschauung connecting pre- and postwar cultural experiences.

What my deployment of myth shares with the more dubious myth of the Resistance is a belief in myth’s potential to facilitate social cohesion. The combination of the war’s unprecedented destruction with rapid postwar modernization led to intense feelings of dislocation, alienation, and, often, oppression. Myth was imagined as a way of
helping alienated individuals reconnect with familiar traditions and carve out a space for pre-war habits and beliefs within the landscape of postwar anxiety. In short, my formulation of myth pushes back against the misconceptions and biases that have plagued the word since the Second World War.

In the end, all definitions of myth are manufactured—prescriptive rather than descriptive. There is no natural means of distinguishing between a myth and a mere story, fable, or fairy tale. Though each of the aforementioned theorists has established rigorous criteria by which he separates myth from other literary and religious creations, those criteria are always at least partially arbitrary. Consequently, the definition of myth that I have adopted is the result of *bricolage* (a key mythic strategy according to Lévi-Strauss), with pieces taken from several of the prevailing definitions of the postwar era. I apply the term “mythic” to works that exhibit the following formal and thematic features:

1. **Non-linear temporality**: This may assume a variety of forms: the superimposition of past, present, and future into one eternal present; cyclical time; anachronism; prophecy; nonsynchronism; atemporality; and temporal expansions or contractions. Each of these temporalities rejects the Hegelian notion of history as progress in favor of the rhythms that characterize nature and the cosmos. However, repetition should not be equated with grim determinism; on the contrary, the novels I consider feature repetition with a difference, creating continuity with the past while carving out a space for a more utopian future. Through this repetition with a difference, modern traumas are inscribed within a
historical system while simultaneously undermining that system.\textsuperscript{25} Mythic
temporalities likewise reject the capitalist mandate to sacrifice present desires to
future concerns, instead validating the worth of present, nonproductive
expenditure.

2. \textit{Rejection of rationality}: This does not necessarily signal an acceptance of
irrationality; rather it is an acknowledgment of the shortcomings of Enlightenment
rationality in the twentieth century, as articulated, for example, by Adorno and
Horkheimer in \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment} (1947).\textsuperscript{26} Nor does it imply a
Corresponding rejection of all order and structure. On the contrary, myth is often
defined by its highly structured nature (as Lévi-Strauss has stressed). I am
interested in the types of structures privileged by the texts under consideration and
the ways in which they invert or subvert rational bourgeois values. Furthermore,
the move away from rationality represents an effort to revise traditional
historiography in order to account for other kinds of historical experiences— for
example, those of women, children, the poor, and the illiterate, which are often
coded as irrational or affective. In short, the rejection of rationality is a rejection
of utilitarian thinking in favor of affect and imagination.

3. \textit{(Re)integration of the individual into the social}: Nearly every definition
acknowledges myth as a cornerstone of social identity. According to Joseph
Campbell, one of the four essential functions of mythology is to integrate the

\textsuperscript{25} To be clear, these repetitions should not be read as evidence of a psychoanalytic repetition compulsion,
as defined by trauma theory. Though trauma theory is frequently invoked in discussions of World War II,
my project takes a different approach to temporality.

\textsuperscript{26} Adorno and Horkheimer famously inverted longstanding claims about the Enlightenment, claiming that
"Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (xviii).
individual organically with his group. Roger Caillois and René Girard discuss myth’s ability to rejuvenate or exculpate troubled communities. Building on these notions of integration and rejuvenation, I contend that myth seeks to overcome the alienation so characteristic of modernity, to resurrect lines of communication, and to rebuild communities following the profound rupture of national, religious, and familial unity that occurred during World War II. If the modern era—and capitalism in particular—is associated with the individual, myth foregrounds the universal. And whereas more explicitly political intellectuals attempted to construct unity through class consciousness, mythic writers turned to more affective forms of community building.

4. **Fusion:** This refers to textual strategies in which the identity of the individual is destabilized due to blurred boundaries between self and world, or self and other. It often involves a mystical union with nature, human-animal hybridity, the existence of a collective unconscious, and/or a neoromantic longing for prelapsarian unity. Mythic fusion requires self-sacrifice, but this loss of self has positive connotations; it is a liberating sacrifice that returns the individual to a sort of primordial unity, as opposed to the negative iterations of sacrifice characteristic of both totalitarian regimes and capitalist oppression. Thus, the aim of myth is not only to reinscribe the individual into a community; it is also to facilitate other forms of communion with both the physical and metaphysical realms. The fusion depicted in the novels of Pavese, Bataille, Simon, and Morante is often grotesque, and sometimes even terrifying, yet it ultimately gives way to a positive union that

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27 See *Occidental Mythology*, pp. 520-521.
allows characters to overcome isolation and disconnection. Thus, fusion represents another effort to combat the narratives of rupture and discontinuity that defined the postwar period.

5. **Bricolage**: As aforementioned, Lévi-Strauss uses the term *bricolage*—a mode of thinking which repurposes available materials to solve new problems—to describe the characteristic patterns of mythological thought. The key difference between the *bricoleur* and the engineer, both of whom assemble projects from preexisting materials, is that the engineer proceeds from goals to means, while the *bricoleur* does not decide ahead of time what he is creating; the process of assemblage takes precedence over any preconceived message. *Bricolage* has no telos, thus once again opposing notions of history as progress. Through a process of decontextualization and recontextualization, familiar narratives are broken apart and repurposed towards new and unexpected ends.

The authors discussed in this dissertation are all able *bricoleurs*, as demonstrated by their ability to adapt historical detritus to address contemporary political and social obstacles. Though Jacques Derrida extends the notion of *bricolage* to any discourse, I will be looking at *bricolage* as a strategy that self-consciously engages with cultural and historical myths (as opposed to the unconscious influences or subtle allusions that might be found in any novel), borrows anthropological terminology related to myth, and deliberately subverts the efforts of many postwar writers to “abandon” history, instead piecing together
ancient and modern sensibilities.\textsuperscript{28} As used by the authors in this project, 

*bricolage* indicates an attempt to find value in the past without idealizing it—a different sort of *bricolage* than the playful or satirical forms characteristic of the postmodern novel. Martin Roberts writes that, “Implicit in *bricolage* are the notions of diversion, deviation, digression, *détournement*, of leading astray, the unexpected swerving away of something from its normal, proper, or intended path. *Bricolage* diverts cultural signs and texts from their usual trajectories, using them for purposes different from, and even contradicting, their previous ones” (14). Thus, it’s a repurposing that not only resuscitates but also *transforms* older traditions, thereby sidestepping the dangers of pure nostalgia for a lost (or imaginary) past.

Taken alone, none of these features is particularly elucidating. Many of the characteristics I associate with myth have been highlighted by other scholars working within other theoretical frameworks. Kristin Ross, for example, in her excellent survey of postwar French cultural history, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, lingers on the temporalities of postwar life—in particular, repetition and the “eternal present”—but attributes them to the realities of factory work and unceasing consumption. In my reading, these kinds of repetitions have the potential to operate in a more constructive manner. Likewise, a preference for community over the individual is characteristic of an immense array of

\textsuperscript{28} In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida writes: “If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur.*"
ideologies, from Communism to National Socialism to Christian democracy. Thus, it is only when these features are viewed in tandem that the particularity of myth emerges.

**Mythistory**

Viewing World War II through the lens of myth is challenging not only because of the negative associations with fascism, but also because myth and history are often presented as antithetical terms. This can be traced back as far as the ancient Greeks and the debate between Herodotus and Thucydides as to whether myth has a place in historiography. In the modern context, myth has been viewed as particularly dangerous to Hegelian and Marxist notions of history. Hegelian history is a dialectical progression, while the temporal structure of myth is one of repetition, eternal presence, and/or a-historicity, thus challenging faith in the impending revolution.\(^{29}\) I push back against this neat division between the two terms, though I do argue that myth subverts traditional historiography insofar as it rejects grand narratives, instead shifting the focus to marginalized figures. This may seem counterintuitive; after all, myth is often criticized for its totalizing impulses. Yet the authors examined here view myth as a means of communicating with and representing communities that lay beyond the boundaries of official discourse. As Michael Rothberg writes, anachronisms (which are an example of mythic temporality) “can be powerfully subversive and demystifying in the ways that they expose the ideological assumptions of historicist categorization” (25). Though the more devoted Communists retained their faith in historical progression even after World

\(^{29}\) Put another way, myth views revolution in its etymological sense, as return of the same, rather than as radical rupture.
War II, many other intellectuals were unable to reconcile the destruction of the war and lack of revolutionary change with pure Marxist theory. For Pavese, Bataille, Simon, and Morante, then, myth becomes a tool for combatting the worst impulses of history without ignoring historical realities entirely—a means of engaging with history without submitting to a naïve vision of progress.\(^{30}\)

Given all the cultural baggage—and given that this project doesn’t use the word in any traditional sense—why bother with myth at all? Why not turn to a less maligned synonym? J.J. White, for example, distinguishes between myths and archetypes, where mythology signifies a set of myths bound to one particular society, while archetype denotes a more general meaning—some primitive or typical recurrent pattern of human behavior. “Archetype” is surely a less loaded term, for even if the kinds of archetypes identified by Karl Jung or Northrop Frye have fallen out of favor, what literary critic could deny the existence of archetypes in novels, modern or otherwise? However, the polyvalence of “myth” and its historical uses and abuses are precisely the point. To engage with myth after the war was an undeniably political decision, and for these four authors to do so represents a conscious decision to rehabilitate existing cultural artifacts, rather than give in to the temptations of amnesia. The fact that it was a common tool of fascist propaganda makes it even more powerful (though also more polemical) as a leftist literary strategy.

For better or for worse, myth was very much a part of the daily lives of many Europeans (both “primitive” and “enlightened”) prior to the war—hence the effectiveness

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\(^{30}\) This troubling of the boundary between myth and history echoes the explosion of new historiographic models that emerged in the 1970s with the publication of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* and Michel de Certeau’s *L’Ecriture de l’histoire*, among others.
of the fascist mobilization of myth. Dismissing myth as escapist or manipulative does not efface its role in these figures’ lives—individuals who had lost much to the war and who were therefore understandably hesitant to make a clean break from the myths that had long structured their communities. Though many intellectuals, faced with the baggage of myth and history, wanted to simply scrap it all and begin anew, the authors considered here sought to recover something from contaminated discourses, recognizing that total rupture would only exacerbate existing feelings of alienation and isolation.

The Lineup

In selecting Pavese, Bataille, Simon, and Morante as case studies of a mythic mode of cognition, I do not intend to create any false equivalencies among them, or group them into anything resembling a cohesive “movement.” “Stylistically” (whatever we might take that word to mean), they are extremely diverse. Pavese is often labeled a neorealist, while Simon is linked to the nouveau roman. Bataille has been deemed nihilistic, Morante hopelessly utopian. However, each in her own way offers an alternative to dominant literary, political, historical, and sociological trends in France and Italy. For all four authors, myth emerges as a means of negotiating the tension between individual aesthetic aims and collective political praxis, rehabilitating defunct paradigms as an alternative to political pessimism.

Chapter One interrogates Cesare Pavese’s late novels, wherein timeless myths and contemporary tragedies coexist palimpsestically. In direct opposition to the narrative of World War II as an incommensurable, epoch-making event, Pavese presents the war as simply the most recent iteration of the tragedy and violence that have defined the rural
Italian experience since time immemorial. This folding of World War II into a mythical notion of eternal recurrence has been criticized for belittling the severity and singularity of contemporary violence, yet I contend that by inscribing the war within a complex and enduring cultural narrative (rather than dismissing fascism as a mere parenthesis in history, as Benedetto Croce was quick to do), Pavese posits myth as a means of productively restructuring chaos in order to overcome its paralyzing illegibility. Though the cyclical nature of Pavese’s myths would seem to damn characters to an ineluctable fate, much like in Greek tragedy, I demonstrate that destiny is subverted by Pavese’s advancement of repetition with a difference. In La luna e i falò, for example, the minor variations between the narrator’s childhood and that of Cinto, the boy he later encounters, create a space for political intervention; whereas the narrator lacked political consciousness in his youth, he is able to imbue Cinto with such knowledge and thereby offer him a means of resistance both to the aftereffects of fascist rule and to more deeply ingrained forms of oppression.

In Chapter Two, I challenge the narrative of a radical rupture between Georges Bataille’s overtly political pre-war thinking and his later writings, associated instead with mysticism and eroticism. If Bataille seemed to change tack in the late 1930s, locating political potential not in violence in the streets but rather in “inner experience,” the two strategies, I argue, lead to the same result: the transfiguration of individual subjectivity into a state of disindividuation, which in turn facilitates communication with the “other.” Having recognized the impossibility of revitalizing modern man merely by imitating the sacrifices and rituals of earlier cultures, Bataille’s pursuit of a modern mythic mentality turned inward, toward meditation and poetry. That is, he posited internal corollaries to the
external actions that initially dominated his thinking, ultimately projecting mythic fiction into the position once occupied by sacrificial violence. I conclude the chapter with a close reading of Bataille’s 1950 novel *L’Abbé C*, a complex collision of *libertinage* and Resistance activities; the protagonist’s transgressive sexuality and strategically “useless” betrayals, I argue, are presented as politically efficacious insofar as they serve the same communicative, community-building function as the myths and rituals of “primitive” societies.

My third chapter focuses on Claude Simon and the mythic temporalities operative in his war narratives, including *La Route des Flandres*, *La Bataille de Pharsale*, and *Les Géorgiques*. I contend that Simon’s seemingly abstract stylistics have much in common with the primordial, concrete elements of myth and seek to correct for the overly simplistic ideologies promulgated in many postwar literary circles. Just as Pavese was able to locate a liberating potential in the otherwise grim repetitions of myth, Simon’s mapping of archaic imagery onto the modern world does not cynically underscore the inevitable repetition of tragedy, but rather provides comfort by projecting the individual out of his isolated condition and into a collective one that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries. If Simon returns again and again to the same episodes—the failure of the Spanish Revolution, or the annihilation of the cavalrmen at the Battle of the Meuse—he nonetheless presents the scenes with slight variations each time, thereby exchanging traumatic repetition for the Deleuzian notion of “vertical repetition,” which is dynamic and transgressive rather than fatalistic.

Finally, in Chapter Four I describe how the reception of Elsa Morante’s bestselling yet highly controversial novel *La Storia* reflected persistent prejudices against
both realism, seen as pitifully outdated, and myth, dismissed as dangerously uncommitted. Her work, which placed highly detailed descriptions of the bombing of Rome alongside lullabies, nursery rhymes, dragons, gnomes, and magical eggs, was coded as regressive or reactionary at the time of publication—a moment when mounting terrorist violence demanded rigorous commitment from writers and intellectuals. Yet I argue that Morante reinvigorated the realist tradition by imbuing a traditional form with a mythic, utopian sensibility. Reason alone, she insisted, cannot achieve revolutionary change; poetry and imagination are equally (if not more) important for stirring men and women to action. Though her novel is rife with politically charged characters, it is ultimately the enchanted child Useppe who serves as Morante’s mouthpiece and most effectively articulates the shortcomings of existing political strategies. I argue that Useppe’s non-progressive experience of time marks an interruption, however small, in the relentless, fatalistic march of history; by creatively re-imagining both space—with his Edenic hideout in the middle of Rome—and language—with his mystical poems—Useppe demonstrates the constructive endeavors toward which dissatisfaction and estrangement may be channeled. The novel privileges the affective, mythic experiences of women, children, the poor, the illiterate, and the elderly over official narratives of the war, thereby challenging standard historiographic strategies and enacting a sort of negative utopianism that retains hope for the future while acknowledging the apocalyptic impulses of the present.

Without romanticizing “primitive” or “innocent” modes of existence à la Rousseau, I want to take seriously these writers’ claims that notions like sacrality, utopianism, and, of course, myth had a defensible, and even vital, role to play in postwar
political life—especially considering the failures of mainstream leftist movements. I do not attempt any sort of assessment of the “efficacy” of this mythic mode—such an assessment would be both untenable and unproductive—but by more clearly articulating what Pavese, Bataille, Simon, and Morante saw as the relationship between myth and politics, I hope to move beyond the ossified narratives of postwar intellectual life.

As a final note, I should say that this project intervenes in fields with intimidatingly robust bibliographies. There is a veritable industry of scholarship surrounding the memory of World War II, intellectuals’ responses to modernization and decolonization, artists’ political responsibilities, and even myth (though not in the precise way used here). The novelty of my interrogation, then, lies in the way it weaves together threads from each of these well-covered terrains, combining them in new ways in order to reconsider the possibilities for both myth and engagement in the wake of World War II.
Chapter One
Myth Takes Root: Pavese’s Politics of Place

Mythos e logos: per lunga tradizione sono concepiti come termini antitetici, che dovrebbero designare realtà che si escludono. […] Ma lo schema dicotomico del ragionare non sembra più sufficiente. La coscienza mitica potrebbe anche essere interpretata come un ampliamento e un arricchimento della ragione. L’esperienza umana non è tutta compresa nella dicotomia tra razionale e irrazionale. Fra questi due campi emerge e si allarga l’ampia regione dell’a-razionale, le comprensione irriflessa e abitudinaria del pre-compreso.
—Franco Ferrarotti

Il discorso letterario fu per Pavese […] fin da principio un discorso anche politico.
—Italo Calvino

Pavese critics have long delighted in rooting out his “contradictions,” locating the driving force of his narratives in the tension between dichotomous terms like individual/collective, myth/reality, myth/history, symbolism/realism, rationality/irrationality, and city/country, to name just a few. Italo Calvino, in an essay composed for the tenth anniversary of Pavese’s death, cites the central theme of both his fiction and his life as the “contrapposizione del vivere tragico al vivere voluttuoso” (Pietra sopra 61). This framework is not without merit; Pavese admitted to many of these contradictions in his diary, noting that he lived “in antinomie: voluttuoso-tragico, vile-eroico, sensuale-ideale” (Mestiere 74). However, none of these pairings accounts for

31 “E che cosa è l’essere tragicamente? La definizione di Pavese in quella pagina pare riguardi solo la freddezza utilitaria del poeta che dà senso allo stato d’animo accettandolo in vista della sua universalizzazione poetica […] essere tragicamente […] vuol dire trasformare il fuoco d’una tensione esistenziale in un operare storico, fare della sofferenza o della felicità privata, queste immagini della nostra morte, […] degli elementi di comunicazione e di metamorfosi, cioè delle forze di vita” (Calvino, Pietra sopra 61).
the role of politics within Pavese’s poetics. Though not present in all of his works, ideological and/or political reflections play a central role in novels like *Il compagno*, *La casa in collina*, and *La luna e i falò*, not to mention his essays for the Communist newspaper *l’Unità*. When his political impulses *are* considered, they are almost invariably pitted against his more “existential” streak—existential being a thinly veiled code for solitary, decadent, or antisocial—with the latter painted as the stronger of the two drives. Politics is likewise posited as incongruous with his engagement with myth: a given work might be characterized as either political or mythical, but almost never both. However, to speak of these terms as diametrically opposed would be inaccurate. A more just appraisal might be that Pavese viewed myth as the wellspring for his writing, though not as its end point. Myth was the germ of his poetry from which he was able to progress from irrationality to rationality, weaving the two together in symbiotic harmony in order to confront political challenges. He never intended to dwell indefinitely in the realm of myth; his goal was to reduce myth to clarity, which also involved transitioning from a-temporality to temporality, from the eternal to the historically contingent. In so doing, he is able to link myth and politics, framing them as merely two steps in a single process. Though his actions during World War II, as well as his representation of the

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32 Antonio Catalfamo views these three novels as Pavese’s “filone resistentiale” (*Dialettica* 78).
33 Calvino is one of the few to reject this strict separation, remarking in his introduction to *Letteratura americana e altri saggi*, a posthumous collection of Pavese’s essays, that the categories used to organize the book—“Scoperta dell’America,” “Letteratura e società,” “Il mito”—were more or less arbitrary: “Ma la nostra è una suddivisione di comodo: si vedrà come questi interessi non siano mai disgiunti; gli stessi motivi corrono da una parte all’altra del libro, e ne seguiamo la nascita e lo sviluppo attraverso le occasioni più disparate” (xii).
34 In “Raccontare è monotono,” Pavese writes: “La ragione ultima – e prima – per cui ci s’induce a comporre una favola, è la smafia di ridurre a chiarezza l’indistinto-irrazionale che cova in fondo alla nostra esperienza” (*Letteratura americana* 335). Though he uses the word “fable” here, the sentiment is equally applicable to myth.
resistance after the fact, would not be characterized as “committed” according to more
rigid Marxist definitions, this does not preclude the possibility of his rehabilitation as an
engaged writer. In fact, I will argue that Pavese’s marginal position vis-à-vis more
overtly political writers allowed him to constructively criticize overly-idealistic
depictions of partisan activity, both during and after the war, offering an alternative
means of approaching salient social issues.\(^{35}\)

Critical opinion about Pavese is clearly divided. Some claim him as one of Italy’s
greatest modern writers, while others are dismissive of what they perceive to be his
outmoded decadentism, existential angst, and lack of political engagement.\(^{36}\) The
question of Pavese’s relationship to politics has haunted his reception from the start; at a
moment when his friends and colleagues were being jailed for antifascist activities, he
seemed more concerned with women and abstract poetic sentiment.\(^{37}\) His own
incarceration did little to ignite his political fervor; \textit{Il carcere}, a fictionalized account of
his time in exile, makes almost no mention of politics, focusing instead on the
protagonist’s loneliness and erotic fantasies. He failed to join the partisans after the fall of
Mussolini in 1943, and though he became a card-carrying member of the Italian
Communist Party (PCI) in 1945, his interest in myth, primitivism, and irrationality

\(^{35}\) Of course, this “alternative” approach was not without risk. Luca Doninella writes that, “Pavese è forse
(…) il più fuori moda fra gli scrittori della nostra storia recente; in un certo senso, il meno facilmente
recuperabile, assimilabile: e dunque – diciamola tutta – il più dimenticato” (qtd. in Catalfamo, \textit{Dialettica}\n11).

\(^{36}\) “La critica di sinistra accusò Paese di ‘decadentismo’ e di ‘irrazionalismo,’ quella ‘tradizionalista di
avere distorto i modelli classici in funzione di una analisi speculativa di tipo esistenzialista e psicanalitico’”
(Catalfamo, \textit{Dialettica} 16).

\(^{37}\) In a somewhat ironic turn of events, Pavese’s one brush with the law occurred because of a woman. He
agreed to hold letters for a female acquaintance, hoping to impress her with his obsequiousness, only to be
arrested when the police discovered said letters. Pavese, like many intellectuals of the period, was
sentenced to \textit{confino}, or internal exile, in Brancaleone Calabro. However, despite his abuse at the hands of
the fascists, this event did not seem to increase his interest in politics.
continually set him apart from his leftist peers and put him at odds with the party’s directives. Though many of Pavese’s contemporaries, including Italo Calvino and Elio Vittorini, defended his political eccentricities, the fact remains that, at a moment when the notion of littérature engagée was gaining momentum, Pavese was penning imaginary dialogues between Greek mythological figures.\footnote{This is the premise of Dialoghi con Leucò (1947), which Pavese considered his magnum opus.}

Pavese scholarship can therefore be split into two competing camps: one strand focuses on the poetic and mythic dimensions of his work, while isolating Pavese from the historical and political events that shaped his generation.\footnote{Antonio Catalfamo is unrelenting in his critique of these binary responses to Pavese: “In realtà, la critica letteraria italiana continua ad essere vittima dei limiti del passato, delle letture puramente simboliche che furono date dell’opera dantesca e dell’interpretazione crociana, che, chiusa nella sua distinzione e contrapposizione tra ‘struttura’ e ‘poesia,’ escludeva, per l’appunto, che si potesse fare poesia della storia” (Mito 279).} The second strand remains invested in Pavese’s biography (with a particular focus on his diary, Il mestiere di vivere (1952)), but with undue attention devoted to his isolation, existential angst, and suicide. Any so-called political engagement is dismissed out of hand as performed in bad faith.

The purpose of my intervention is to combine these two critical trends, one focused on myth, the other on Pavese’s life, in order to demonstrate that Pavese’s study and deployment of myth was in fact a form of engagement (in the Sartrean sense) with notable consequences for the representation of World War II, the role of the intellectual, and the position of the PCI in postwar Italian cultural life. Furthermore, his use of myth helped to rehabilitate the concept in the wake of its instrumentalization by the fascists. Much of the Communist resistance to myth stemmed from the fear of its propagandistic effects on the masses. However, in response to comments from Franco Fortini on the risks posed by “cose primitive ed arcaiche,” Pavese reassured him that “il pericolo da lui
prospettato non sussiste perché è chiaro che il folclore e la mentalità mitica interessano il politico ‘scientifico’ come accadimenti, come fenomeni da ridurre al più presto a chiara razionalità, a legge storica” (qtd in Lajolo 277). I therefore maintain that he was just as concerned as his peers with the political responsibilities of the writer, and that his decision to approach engagement through the lens of myth reflects his dissatisfaction with existing modes of commitment, rather than evasion. If, as Calvino insists, Pavese is an exemplary figure for postwar Italian writers, representing a wider intellectual crisis, then his hesitations and inconsistencies in the political realm are crucial to our understanding of the postwar climate in Italy, and his decision to superimpose politics and myth could offer a valuable tool for re-interpreting World War II and its aftermath.40

“Non fate troppi pettugolezzi”

Cesare Pavese was born on September 9, 1908, in Santo Stefano Belbo. Though raised and educated in Turin, his family returned to Santo Stefano each summer, and the rural community left an indelible mark on Pavese’s writing; the city/country dichotomy is a common theme in both his poetry and prose. A great admirer and translator of American literature, Pavese graduated from the University of Turin in 1930 with a thesis on Walt Whitman. Much of his early career was dedicated to critical essays on American writers, ranging from Sinclair Lewis to Herman Melville to William Faulkner (a fact that some used against him, accusing him of antipatriotic and exoticist tendencies). He also

40 In his introduction to La letteratura americana e altri saggi, Calvino writes: “Il valore di questi scritti, però, non sta solo nella documentazione di un cammino culturale individuale; l’esperienza di Pavese è stata esemplare e cruciale di tutta una generazione letteraria, quella cresciuta sotto il fascismo, quella che avvertì nuovi bisogni e fece una svolta, una sortita (letteraria e morale) nuova, e poi – morto il fascismo – si trovò di fronte ancora altri problemi, e ancora alterna speranze e inquietudini” (xi-xii).
translated a number of canonical American novels, including *Moby Dick*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Pavese was fourteen when Mussolini seized power, inaugurating a period of stifled creative and intellectual freedom. Turin, however, was a hotbed of political dissidence, welcoming such antifascist leaders as Antonio Gramsci and Piero Gobetti. Though Pavese was certainly not a militant antifascist, his discovery of American literature had political valences. Many years later, he acknowledged that, “A questo punto la cultura americana divenne per noi qualcosa di molto serio e prezioso […] Ci si accorse, durante quegli anni di studio, che l’America non era un altro paese, un nuovo inizio della storia, ma soltanto il gigantesco teatro dove con maggiore franchezza che altrove veniva recitato il drama di tutti” (*Letteratura americana* 194-95). America, in Pavese’s personal mythology, became a symbol of liberty, creativity, and communicative potential. He praised American slang for its originality and capacity to more effectively bridge the gap between words and objects.

At the University of Turin, Pavese fell in with a group of writers, artists, and intellectuals, including the likes of Leone Ginzburg and Carlo Levi, whose opposition to Mussolini was more pronounced than his own. Ginzburg and Levi were both leaders in the antifascist movement Giustizia e Libertà, for which they were arrested in 1935. Pavese, though not formally a member, was likewise jailed, both for his association with known resistance leaders, and for carrying politically compromising letters on behalf of a female acquaintance. Like many dissidents of the period, Pavese was sentenced to *confino*, or internal exile; he spent roughly a year in Brancaleone Calabro, at the southern tip of Italy. Though the experience seems to have affected his personal life more than his
political one (the woman with whom he was in love married someone else during his absence), the displacement was important for at least two reasons: first, it is during this period that he began his now famous diary (published in 1952 as *Il mestiere di vivere*), and second, it put him in contact with the poverty, oppression, and, perhaps most importantly, mythic mentality of rural southern Italians. These themes became central to Pavese’s poetics; indeed, the political stakes of the so-called “problem of the South” weighed on the minds of many exiled intellectuals.⁴¹

Prior to his confinement, Pavese had published one collection of verse, *Lavorare stanca*, but by 1940 he had made the transition to prose. In 1941, he published two novels: *La Spiaggia* and *Paesi tuoi*, the latter of which treats the violence and fatalism of Italian peasant life. From 1941 to 1946 there was a gap in his literary output, a reflection of the difficulties (both artistic and logistical) of publishing in the middle of a world war.⁴² In response to the Allied bombing campaign in 1943, Pavese was forced to flee Turin to the surrounding hills. Many partisans, including a number of Pavese’s friends, made those hills their base of operations as they sought to eradicate the remaining fascist forces. Pavese, however, forewent direct participation in the fighting, instead retreating to his sister’s home in Serralunga di Crea. This period of hiding also corresponds with a

⁴¹ Vincent Crapanzano describes the *Mezzogiorno* (Southern Italy) as: “those impoverished lands that have for centuries provided the (Northern) Italian geographical, political, and literary imaginary with defining alterity. Sixteenth-century Jesuits referred to the South as an Italian India. […] The South was – and still is at varying levels of consciousness – the space of the primitive, of superstition, the irrational, magic, desiccation, and death. It has also been characterized as the land of violent emotion, explosive passion, ruthless exploitative, pervasive corruption, and insidious mistrust. It has been a privileged space of ethnographic and folkloristic investigation which, until scholars like de Martino turned their attention to it, rarely looked with a critical eye on their own fascination with it and the implications of that fascination for their understanding of the South and, in consequence, the North” (vii).

⁴² The offices of the Einaudi publishing house (where Pavese was employed) were temporarily occupied by fascist forces.
sudden resurgence of interest in religion. Pavese sought refuge for a period in a monastery (a fictional account of which occurs in *La casa in collina*), which only served to exacerbate his religious fervor. Nonetheless, Catholicism never fully took hold, and following the war, he returned to a more humanistic approach to religious sentiment.

The postwar period (1945-1950) was Pavese’s most prolific. He published no fewer than nine works, ranging from the overtly political *Il compagno* (1947) to the poetic and mythical *Dialoghi con Leucò* (1947), and culminating in *La luna e i falò* (1950) which, perhaps more than any other novel, effectively blends his political and mythical impulses. He continued to work as an editor at the Einaudi Publishing House, having joined the enterprise at Giulio Einaudi’s bidding in 1933.

On August 26, 1950, Pavese rented a hotel room, made a few telephone calls, and took an overdose of sleeping pills. Most scholars blame his suicide on a failed love affair with American actress Constance Dowling, though his letters and diary reveal that he had toyed with the idea from a young age. In true literary fashion, he chose to end his life in the same manner as one of his characters, mimicking a scene from *Tra donne sole*. A copy of *Dialoghi con Leucò* (which he considered his magnum opus) was discovered on his bedside table, with the inscription: “Perdono tutti e a tutti chiedo perdono. Va bene? Non fate troppi pettegolezzi.” He was forty-one years old.

*Decadentism, Neorealism, and Other –isms*

In order to understand both Pavese’s artistic formation, as well as the reasoning behind the critical response to his work, it is necessary to situate him within his historical moment and examine the literary and political trends to which he was responding. His
early poetry has frequently been compared to the likes of Gabriele D’Annunzio or Giacomo Leopardi—that is, marked by a decidedly decadent or pessimistic streak. Though composed during the height of fascist rule, the poems of *Lavorare stanca*, for example, do not address contemporary political issues, instead focusing on nature and the life of the peasant, thus indicating some residue of early twentieth-century (and even late nineteenth-century) poetic modes.

However, Pavese’s most prolific period (1945-1950) roughly overlaps with the short-lived yet immensely influential neorealist movement. Though often considered more of a *cinematic* style than a literary one (a view that Pavese promulgated), neorealism arose from “the collective experience of the war itself, the civil war, and the Resistance which trigger[ed] the explosion of a ‘committed’ narrative practice in both Italian literature and film, as well as an intense debate over the political and ideological function of art, and a search for a new realism and new modes of expression” (Re 12). Neorealism, though stylistically diverse, included the use of such subgenres as memoires, diaries, sketches, short docufiction, and chronicles in order to narratively reconstruct the recent past.

The term “neorealist” was used to describe Pavese in a 1941 review of his novel *Paesi tuoi*, and despite his stylistic shifts near the end of the decade, he is still often

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43 The word “movement” may be too strong; in his introduction to the 1964 edition of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, Calvino writes that neorealism was not a school, instead comprising “un insieme di voci, in gran parte periferiche, una molteplice scoperta delle diverse Italie, anche – o specialmente – delle Italie fino allora più inedite per la letteratura” (9).

44 Pavese not only noted that “questa parola [neo-realismo] ha soprattutto oggi un senso cinematografico”—he also bemoaned the fact that the same word was used as a compliment when applied to film, and an accusation when applied to literature: “Come avviene che la stessa etichetta definisca con lode una cinematografia e con biasimo una narrativa, che pure sono nate contemporaneamente sullo stesso terreno?” (*Letteratura americana* 292).
linked with the movement. It is important to note, however, that neorealism bears little affinity with either realism (in the nineteenth-century Balzacian sense) or socialist realism (the genre officially advocated by the Communist party). Indeed, many neorealist writers engaged with non-realist genres like fables, fairy tales, and myths, convinced that such “folk” material more effectively captured the experience of working class or rural Italians. Calvino’s *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, for example, often considered a cornerstone of neorealist fiction, in many ways reads like a fairy tale, more redolent of *Treasure Island* than *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Today, the label most commonly applied to Pavese is “symbolic realist,” referring to his efforts to combine “la ricchezza d’esperienze del realismo a la profondità di sensi del simbolismo” (*Mestiere* 166). Thus, he drew both from the “decadent” symbolism of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century poets and the neorealism of the postwar period, struggling to join them in a constructive manner without effacing the particularity of either trend.

Though he officially joined the Communist Party in 1945 and frequently wrote for their newspaper, *l’Unità*, he soon felt alienated by the party’s increasingly ideological approach to literature: socialist realism, or Zhdavonism, was the order of the day. However, I contend that his comments on the poetic vacuousness of overly ideological

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45 In fact, in his preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, Calvino credits Pavese as one of the “founders” of neorealism: “Ci eravamo fatta una linea, ossia una specie di triangolo: *I Malavoglia, Conversazione in Sicilia, Paesi tuoi, da cui partire*” (9).
46 It was Pavese, in fact, who first spoke of the fairy-tale quality in Calvino’s writing (see Calvino’s preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, p. 17).
47 Critics have offered several explanations for this sudden entry into politics, including guilt over his failure to join the partisans and/or a desire to honor his friend Giachine Pintor, who was killed for his part in the Resistance. Regardless of his reasons, he quickly found the literary directives of the party stifling.
texts do not reveal, as some claim, a lack of commitment, but rather a profound mistrust of the particular form of commitment being promulgated in the postwar period.  

Pavese was by no means the only writer to gradually distance himself from the restrictive dictates of the party. Vittorini, director of the Communist journal *Il Politecnico* from 1945-47, got caught up in a very public dispute with Palmiro Togliatti, leader of the PCI; Calvino similarly framed his own work as a provocative response to the pressure to politicize literature:

> Cominciava appena allora il tentativo d’una “direzione politica” dell’attività letteraria: si chiedeva allo scrittore di creare “l’eroe positivo”, di dare immagini normative, pedagogiche di condotta sociale, di milizia rivoluzionaria. […] La mia reazione d’allora potrebbe essere enunciata così: “Ah, si, volete ‘eroe socialista’? Volete il ‘romanticismo rivoluzionario’? E io vi scrivo una storia di partigiani in cui nessuno è eroe, nessuno ha coscienza di classe.” (“Prefazione” 14)

For intellectuals across the nation, the untempered enthusiasm and optimism of the Liberation quickly ceded to disillusionment and frustration, as the PCI made numerous concessions in its efforts to form coalitions. These machinations ultimately backfired; the Christian Democrats, led by Alcide De Gasperi, secured a sweeping victory in the April 1948 elections, effectively shutting the Communists out of government. In his introduction to Pavese’s *La Letteratura americana e altri saggi*, Calvino notes the mix of euphoric optimism and sadness that runs through Pavese’s 1946 article “Dialoghi col

48 “La costrizione ideologica esercitata sull’atto della poesia trasforma senz’altro i leopardi e le aquile in agnelli e tacchini” (*Letteratura americana* 333).

49 At least some of the credit for De Gasperi’s victory goes to the Americans, who supported him in an effort to stem the rising tide of Communist influence. The CIA admits to donating upwards of one million dollars to his campaign, and they have been accused of forging letters to discredit the PCI.
compagno,” a tone that we might consider emblematic of that fluctuating period in Italian history.\(^{50}\)

We can see, then, that Pavese stood precariously balanced between two poetic ideals—decadentism and neorealism—each associated with a distinct historical moment. Despite criticism from his former teacher and mentor Augusto Monti, who urged him to leave his childish abstractions behind, he remained firmly committed to the goal of reconciling his passion for myth, primitivism, and irrationality—widely popular in the early part of the twentieth-century, but viewed with suspicion after World War II—with the political urgency of the postwar era.

Rather than viewing Pavese’s œuvre as driven by the fundamental tension between two incompatible strands of thought, I assert that the myths speak directly to political problems—without falling victim to propaganda (either fascist or Communist), and without sacrificing complexity in the name of ideological coherence. His oscillation between private and public, existential and political, myth and logos was a natural consequence of his search for new modes of “committed” expression that were less ideologically programmatic. The ways in which Pavese has been read up until this point are thus more representative of his readers’ dogmatism than of his own principles. Vincenzo Binetti claims that Pavese was not relegated to the margins of the intellectual world, but rather intentionally sought this position as a means of fighting mainstream

\(^{50}\) “I dialoghi operai del 1946 posson parere dettati da un euforico ottimismo, di giungere a una comunicazione totale, d’abbattere la barrier, spiegare tutto, capire e far capire tutto: ma c’è dentro una vena di tristezza che affiora sovente, un presagio di ripiegamento su se stesso” (Letteratura americana xxv-xxvi).
dogma; if we accept this reading, then naturally his style of “commitment” would take a different form than that of his contemporaries.\footnote{Binetti writes that, “La contemporaneità di Pavese risiede dunque nella sua diversità, nel suo porsi ai margini, opponendo alle coerenze programmatiche di quell momento culturale, una cosciente volontà disaggregante e provocatoria che mettesse in risalto le incrinature ed i limiti di un sistema propenso invece a stabilire, tra i membri della collettività, accomodanti ed inquietanti certezze” \textit{(Vita imperfetta} 135).}

In this chapter, I draw from a wide range of Pavese’s texts in order to tease out his definitions of terms like myth, symbol, reality, poetry, and \textit{impegno}. I conclude with a close reading of his final novel, \textit{La luna e i falò} (1950), which I view as an ideal synthesis of his mythical and political thinking. Pavese’s decision to address partisan warfare, Communist ideology, and the mythic rituals of rural Italy in a single novel reflects his views of the enduring role of mythology in the everyday lives of Italians and the failure of the war to stamp out perennial oppression. This convergence of myth and sociohistorical reality opened up new possibilities for political commitment, ones that were explored by figures like Calvino in his later, more fantastic works.\footnote{\textit{Il barone rampante}, for example, published in 1957, is often considered a fabulistic response to Calvino’s disapproval of Communist policy—most notably, the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. He withdrew from the PCI following the invasion, publishing an explanation of his decision in \textit{L’Unità}.} Though the readers of the late 1940s were not quite ready for Pavese’s brand of commitment (which they perceived as defeatist), interest in Pavese reached a fever pitch in the 1970s. Antonio Catalfamo attributes this phenomenon to intellectuals’ growing dissatisfaction with the inefficacy of leftist politics, a fact that Pavese had already observed some three decades earlier.
One of the difficulties of discussing Pavese’s engagement with myth is that he rarely used the word in the same manner as his contemporaries, and his own definition emerged only piecemeal (and not without the occasional contradiction). Nonetheless, I will attempt a preliminary synthesis of his reflections on myth. First and foremost, Pavese regretted the negative connotations the word had attracted in Italian culture and rejected any mystical overtones in favor of a more historical definition of the word:

La parola *mito* è a ragione oggi alquanto screditata. Ma adoperandola per indicare quell’interiore immagine estatica, embroniale, gravida di sviluppi possibili, che è all’origine di qualunque creazione poetica, non crediamo di parlare un linguaggio mistico né estetizzante. Semplicemente, condensiamo in una parola un complesso discorso storico e una convinta poetica che su di esso si appoggia e si giustifica. *(Letteratura americana* 345)

Furthermore, though he takes Greek mythology as his starting point in *Dialoghi con Leucò*, his intention is not to reproduce classical myths in a modern context, but rather to use them as a schema onto which he can map modern social concerns: “Non certo rifare i miti greci, ma seguire la loro impostazione fantastica (inutile dire che è impossibile, dati i tempi di ‘lumi’—per questo digrigno i denti e mi maggio le unghie)” (qtd. in Lajolo 218). Thus, Pavese’s conception of myth has little to do with either classical texts or mysticism, being grounded instead in historical discourse and poetic conviction. And as outlined in the introduction, Pavesian myth presents itself through a combination of non-linear temporality, non-rationality, community, fusion, and *bricolage*. 
**Fuori del tempo**

Pavese frequently writes about myth as existing outside of time: “qualcosa, per accadere, ha bisogno d’esser già accaduto, d’essere stato fondato fuori del tempo. Il mito è ciò che accade-riaccade infinite volte nel mondo sublunare eppure è unico, fuori del tempo, così come una festa ricorrente si svolge ogni volta come fosse la prima, in un tempo che è il tempo della festa, del non-temporale, del mito” (Letteratura americana 345-46). Initially, the sort of universality implied by non-temporality might seem incommensurable with the historically specific political exigencies of postwar Italy. However, mythic temporality plays two important functions in the context of war representation: first, it connects singular, unprecedented events—events that resist representation—to comprehensible times and spaces, thus offering a means of working through the trauma of the war, and second, it is representative of the temporality experienced by many peasants in rural communities (especially in the South). Stasis characterized both their natural surroundings (via seasonal repetition) as well as the passage from one generation to the next. Furthermore, Pavese never abandoned history in favor of mythic time, but rather sought to reconcile the a-temporality of poetic contemplation with the temporal aspects of everyday reality: “Ciò che affascina Pavese è dunque la possibilità di conciliare le componenti metastoriche del mito e quindi il momento contemplative dell’ispirazione poetica con la immediatezza del reale: ‘mettere l’assoluto in un rapporto umano, ecco il desiderio grandioso e pazzo di quest’uomo’” (Binetti, Vita imperfetta 112). While maintaining a properly Marxist vision of the writer
as historically and economically determined, he also viewed myth and poetry as a potential transcendence of those conditions.53

The “eternal” aspect of myth emerges through its repeatability: “A questo temps retrouvé non manca del mito genuino nemmeno la ripetibilità, la facoltà cioè di reincarnarsi in ripetizioni, che appaiono e sono creazioni ex novo, così come la festa ricelebra il mito e insieme lo instaura come se ogni volta fosse la prima” (Letteratura americana 302). This notion of repetition has both positive and negative connotations for Pavese. On the positive end of the spectrum, we have the possibility of connecting in a meaningful way with the past, which Pavese views as a prime source of creativity: “Ebbero molto più senso del passato i popoli ai primordi della storia che non i successivi. Quando un popolo non ha più un senso vitale del suo passato si spegne. La vitalità creatrice è fatta di una riserva di passato. Si diventa creatori – anche noi – quando si ha un passato. La giovinezza dei popoli è una ricca vecchiaia (genius is wisdom and youth)” (Mestiere 155). However, this insistence on the perpetuation of older stories and practices does not preclude the possibility of innovation or modernization; for Pavese, the eternal is merely a starting point from which one then enters history: “Se tutto si ripete, non si ripete mai allo stesso modo, e in questa diversità s’inserisce la dimensione storica, l’intervento dell’uomo buono” (Catalfamo, Dialettica 261). Myth metamorphoses into other forms, thus linking the a-temporal to the temporal in productive ways: “Veduto dall’interno, un mito evidentemente è una rivelazione, un assoluto, un attimo

53 “Che ciascuno di noi – anche lo scrittore – sia radicato in una data situazione, in una classe, in uno storico conflitto inevitabile, è vero. Ma è vero, altrettanto che, quando si prende in mano la penna per narrare sul serio, tutto è già accaduto, si chiudono gli occhi e si ascolta una voce che è fuori dal tempo” (Letteratura americana 280).
intemporale, ma per la sua stessa natura tende a farsi storia, ad accadere tra gli uomini, a
diventare cioè poesia o teoria, con ciò negandosi come mito, come fuori-del-tempo, a
sottoponendosi all’indagine genetico-causale degli storici” (*Letteratura americana* 349).

Pavese argues that myth is never myth the first time it appears; it *becomes* myth in
subsequent iterations. Thus, the repetitions that occur across an individual’s lifetime are
not experienced as identical repetitions. In “Del mito, del simbolo e d’altro,” Pavese
insists that as a child, we fail to appreciate the mythic power of that which we behold; it
is only when we experience it a second time that its true value emerges: “Poiché,
rigorosamente, non esiste un ‘veder le cose la prima volta’: quella che conta è sempre una
seconda” (*Letteratura americana* 302). Myth, then, is the combinatory effect of a first-
time (a childhood experience) and a second-time (the return of said experience as an
adult)—a repetition that imparts meaning to the quotidian.

On the negative side of the spectrum, repetition possesses the ability to trap men
in an irrefutable destiny. Destiny, too, is defined by its temporality; it is that which is
fixed in time: “Una vita appare destino quando inaspettatamente si rivela esemplare e
fissata da sempre. Dal groviglio del banale-imprevisto esce una figura essenziale-
risaputa” (*Letteratura americana* 342). Pavese goes on to discuss destiny’s rhythm—a
rhythm of perpetual returns: “Un destino non è altro che un ritmo, una cadenza di ritorni
previsti nel gioco di una libertà tutta tesa” (*Letteratura americana* 343). Repetition with a
difference is thus essential to interrupting mythic recurrences before they doom
characters to an ineluctable fate. Though Pavese often adopts a wistful, reverent tone
when writing about nature or childhood, he does not advocate an indefinite perpetuation
of those “ideal” states through eternal repetition, instead facilitating incremental change
through minor differences. Thus, when Anguilla, the protagonist of *La Luna e i falò*, encounters Cinto, a boy whose experiences and social status seem to mark him as Anguilla’s duplicate, Anguilla strives to impart some political consciousness to the boy—consciousness that he himself did not acquire till much later in life—in order to open up a different path for him. Though it is unclear whether the advice takes—his friend, Nuto, despite being a devoted Communist, is skeptical of the possibility of change—the seed of revolution has nonetheless been planted.

*Il selvaggio*

Pavese frequently maps the tension between rational and irrational worldviews onto the city/country dichotomy. The majority of his novels are set in rural locations (or feature city-dwellers pining for their rustic origins). However, despite some romantic residues in his thinking, Pavese’s appreciation for nature is not merely a holdover from romanticism, wherein nature serves as the embodiment of innocence and purity. On the contrary, Pavese often portrays nature as hostile and potentially deadly. Though he draws a clear contrast between city and country, the moral attributes that he applies to each locale are malleable. In early works like *Paesi tuoi*, it is the city, not nature, which assumes a positive valence within Pavese’s schema. The country is a place of violence—primordial, irrational violence stemming from centuries of poverty and oppression. The city, as the symbol of class ascension, offers the only means of escape. In later works, the terms are inverted and the city is viewed as a corruptive influence. In *Il diavolo sulle colline*, for example, it is Poli, the friend who visits from the city and who has successfully transitioned from a mere country boy to a member of Turin high society,
who is prey to self-destructive impulses and threatens to infect his boyhood friends. In the end, neither city nor country retains its redemptive potential. In La luna e i falò, Anguilla criticizes residents of both locales: the peasants for their downtrodden acceptance of abuse at the hands of the landlords and their decision to direct that frustration toward their own families; and the city folk for their superficiality, exploitation, and greed. Brian Moloney identifies war as the great leveler that leads Pavese to view both city and country as equally likely to house “il selvaggio.”

What is most germane to this discussion, however, is the fact that the “irrationality” associated with rural locales, though coded as violent, is not presented as a strictly negative phenomenon. On the contrary, in Pavese’s later novels “irrationality” emerges as a powerful, untapped force, and thus a catalyst for political progress. The city may be linked to order, reason, and social mobility, but it is also cut off from myth and tradition and thus cannot provide the social change Pavese yearns for. In La luna e i falò, Anguilla feels compelled to return to the “barbaric” countryside of his childhood, despite his financial successes in America. While he mocks his friend Nuto for spouting “ignorant” superstitions, it’s not long before he, too, adopts a quasi-mythical position towards nature, lovingly anthropomorphizing the grapevines: “rimuginavo che non c’è niente di più bello di una vigna ben zappata, ben legata, con le foglie giuste e quell’odore della terra cotta dal sole d’agosto. Una vigna ben lavorata è come un fisico sano, un corpo che vive, che ha il suo respiro e il suo sudore” (40).

54 “War, however, reveals that the ‘selvaggio’ is an omnipresent threat, both in the city (as with the rat in the ruins of the bombed house in La casa in collina) and in the country (as we see with the bodies of the ‘repubblichini’ in La luna e i falò)” (Moloney 119).
Even when striving for rational conclusions, Pavese acknowledged the limitations of reason:

Possiamo, dunque, individuare una prima dimensione del mito pavesiano, quella che definiamo ‘razionale.’ È necessaria, però, una precisazione. Questa definizione si riferisce al fatto che Pavese analizza il mito attraverso la ragione, per ‘ridurlo a chiarezza.’ Ma egli è, nel contempo, consapevole dei limiti della ragione, che, ciononostante, è l’unico strumento che l’uomo ha a disposizione per comprendere il mondo. Nel suo processo di ‘ regressione’ verso l’inconscio e il passato, fino ai primordi, lo scrittore incontra anche elementi ‘irrazionali’ e ‘a-razionali.’ Quel che importa qui rilevare è che Pavese ha superato, grecamente, la contrapposizione tra ‘mito’ e ‘logos,’ che, purtroppo, caratterizza ancora tanta parte della cultura moderna.” (Catalfamo, Mito 251-52)

Working in opposition to both Crocean and Marxist visions of rationality, which frequently displayed an ethnocentric snobbism towards the superstitions and rituals of the South, Pavese argued that such rituals should in fact lead “enlightened” individuals to scrutinize their own conception of reality, especially given rationalism’s failure to address modern alienation. In this, he builds off of Ernst Cassirer’s theorization of myth, wherein man is not a rational animal, but a symbolic one. For Cassirer, to treat myth as a false representation of the world, one waiting to be “corrected” by a properly rational representation, is to ignore the wider range of human intellectual power. Pavese sought to recuperate this wider range of experiences, arguing that myth was valuable not in spite of its irrationality, but precisely because of it.

Pavese e il popolo

Many of Pavese’s protagonists suffer from a crippling sense of isolation (which scholars have frequently read as autobiographical); the collection Prima che il gallo

55 See Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 2. As I discuss later in the chapter, Pavese also associated symbolism with myth.
"canti," for example, which comprises the novels *Il carcere* and *La casa in collina,* thematizes the painful inability to relinquish isolation and self-interest in the face of the struggles of others, and the lonely remorse of the uncommitted. Yet these characters also express a strong desire to join a community or cause, whether political, religious, or merely fraternal. In many cases, the community they seek is linked to a homeland; Anguilla, for example, though a bastard with no familial ties to his village, feels compelled to return there as an adult. Having experienced the hyper-individualism of America, he longs for the community in which he was born, to the point of rejecting the people, the stars, and the wine anywhere else. As Paolo Milano explains, “Pavese is haunted by the feeling that modern life has no roots. Our life is either mechanical or utopian, practical or fanatical. Amid the poverty-stricken people of backward countries, sap is still flowing, but it may very well dry up soon” (xiii). Thus, Pavese’s turn to myth is motivated by a desire to keep the sap flowing, as it were. The theme of man’s fundamental isolation is ubiquitous in modern Italian poetry; what sets Pavese apart is that he tries to *solve* this problem by revitalizing a mythic mentality, which might in turn revitalize marginalized communities.

Pavese’s non-fiction also reveals a sustained concern with writers’ relationships to the masses. Though the literary profession has often suffered from accusations of ivory tower escapism, for Pavese writing was one of the few occupations that allowed a

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56 Staring at the sky one evening in California, for example, he reflects, “Capii nel buio, in quell’odore di giardino e di pini, che quelle stelle non erano le mie, che come Nora e gli avventori mi facevano paura. Le uova al lardo, le buone paghe, le arance grosse come angurie, non erano niente […] Valeva la pena esser venuto?” (17).

57 See, for example, “Il comunismo e gli intellettuali” and “Dialoghi col compango” in *Letteratura americana e altri saggi.*
convergence of “io” and “noi,” of solitude and communion: “È bello scrivere perché riunisce le due gioie: parlare da solo e parlare a una folla” (Mestiere 273). Pavese writes of the movement from individual to collective as one of maturation, whereby the force of the individual artist is transferred to collective symbols:

I simboli, creati da una cultura con sforzi individuali, diventano operanti e fanno maturità quando assurgano a simboli collettivi – il passaggio di una cultura a un’altra più complessa è come il passaggio dalla mitologia di un creatore singolo a una mitologia collettiva. Se lo sforzo benemerito di un singolo uomo o di una singola città non deve servire a tutti i volenterosi, non si capisce a chi deva servire. (Letteratura americana 363)

Pavese insists that reality becomes more comprehensible when viewed through the lens of the collective (that is, when all the resources of a group are available and one is no longer limited by individual interpretation):

La nostra definizione di mito avverte che di questo si può parlare soltanto quando incarni una realtà inafferrabile. Ma ne esiste tutta una classe dove la realtà è afferrabilissima quando si tenga presente ch’essa supera la sfera individuale e richiama un’esperienza collettiva, vale a dire afferrabile da chi raccolga la cangiante materia dei successivi sedimenti accumulati da un intero gruppo umano (Letteratura americana 335).

If reality seems to be inscrutable, it is perhaps because the individual has yet to finish probing it to the point that his interests coincide with those of the group.

To return once more to the lingering influence of romanticism on Pavese’s poetics, a comment from his diary succinctly expresses his interest in the convergence of individuality and cosmic totality for romantic poets:

È curioso come il Romanticismo, che passa per la scoperta e la protesta dell’individuo, dell’originalità, del genio, sia tutto pervaso di una ansia d’unità, di totalità cosmica; e abbia inventato i miti della caduta dalla primitiva Unità e ricercato i mezzi (poesia, amore, progresso storico, contemplazione della natura, magia, ecc.) per ricomporla. Prova di questa tendenza è la creazione di tanti concetti collettivi (la nazione, il popolo, il cristianesimo, il germanesimo, il gotico, la latinità, ecc.) (Mestiere 225)
Thus, even if we accept the accusations of isolationism and overly existential contemplation that were leveled against Pavese, the fact remains that “individual” and “collective” are not mutually exclusive terms. Though the community Pavese imagined was not entirely in line with mainstream Marxist conceptions of the term, he nonetheless sought to mobilize existing myths and rituals in order to revive declining communal structures.

**In Search of Lost Unity**

Pavese’s fiction reveals a definite preoccupation with childhood; child characters, as well as adult protagonists reminiscing about their childhoods, populate his novels. This is due in part to the fact that childhood is the age at which one’s relationship to myth is most salient. It is the stage during which we are in closest contact with the world, when the barrier between word and world (between signifier and signified) is malleable, when we are immersed in myth without being aware of it: “Nessun bambino ha coscienza di vivere in un mondo mitico. [...] La ragione è che negli anni mitici il bambino ha assai di meglio da fare che dare un nome al suo stato” (*Letteratura americana* 302). In such a state, poetry emerges spontaneously as an unfettered reflection of nature.

Pavese made no secret of his appreciation for Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth-century philosopher and historian whose most famous work, *La scienza nuova* (1725), presents a cyclical model of history.\(^{58}\) The first stage in the cycle, the age of gods, is often referred to as the “childhood” of man; however, contrary to historical models that view

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\(^{58}\) In a 1950 article written for *Cultura a realtà*, he set down his interpretation of Vico, insisting on his continued relevance.
primitive man as less sophisticated and with less linguistic prowess than his more enlightened counterpart, Vico aligned the age of gods with poetic language. Pavese drew a direct connection between children, primitive men, and poets in his analysis of Vico: “Quelli che il Vico chiama universali fantastici sono – è noto – i miti, e in essi i fanciulli, i primitivi, i poeti [...] risolvono la realtà, sia teoretica che pratica” (Letteratura americana 346). To be a poet, then, one must adopt the position of the child (or primitive man), which in turn means dismantling the barriers between self and world such that unity is once more possible.

In La casa in collina, the protagonist’s desire to recreate the instinctive world of childhood is expressed as a desire to physically unite with nature. In the midst of war and alienation, nature provides a much-needed sense of continuity and reliability. Pavese reiterates the centrality of this human-animal bond in his journal:

Il tuo motivo del caprone era il mot. del nesso tra l’uomo e il naturale-ferino. Di qua il tuo gusto della preistoria: il tempo in cui s’intravede una promiscuità dell’uomo con la natura-belva. Di qui la tua ricerca dell’origine dell’immagine in quei tempi: la promiscuità di un primo termine (solitam. umano) con un secondo (solitam. naturale) che sarebbe qualcosa di più di un semplice fantastico: una testimonianza di un nesso vivo. (Mestiere 165)

Man’s connection with the land is also a central preoccupation for Pavese. In La luna e i falò, Anguilla describes the land as something carried in one’s bones:

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59 “Essential to Pavese’s subsequent treatment of myth is the Vichian notion of a parallel between each individual’s experience of childhood and the psychology of the earliest epoch of humanity. Like Vico, Pavese envisaged childhood as a reflection of the primitive world, in which contact with immediate reality was direct and instinctive, and the perception of the savage and the sacred forces in nature was marked with spontaneous emotion. This perception, largely lost to the modern era and forgotten by the child who has grown to be an adult, survives, however, in poetry and in mythology, and can be recaptured by the adult in rare instances of sharp recall. From this concept Pavese developed his notion of the ‘ecstatic moment’—illustrated in many of the stories of Feria d’agosto—which is not without a convergent influence from the late-romantic sensibility” (O’Healy 86).
Che cos’è questa valle per una famiglia che venga dal mare, che non sappia niente della luna e dei falò? Bisogna averci fatto le ossa, averla nelle ossa come il vino e la polenta, allora la conosci senza bisogno di parlarne, e tutto quello che per tanti anni ti sei portato dentro senza saperlo si sveglia adesso al tintinnio di una martinicca, al colpo di coda di un bue, al gusto di una minestra, a una voce che senti sulla piazza di notte. (41)

He goes even further, claiming that when men breathe in the scent of the land, they are themselves contained in that scent via some sort of fluid exchange: “È un caldo che mi piace, sa un odore: ci sono dentro anch’io a quest’odore, ci sono dentro tante vendemmie e fienagioni e sfogliature, tanti sapori e tante voglie che non sapevo più d’ave re addosso” (22). In these rural communities, the land is therefore not simply a place, but something physically integrated into the body.

Pavese’s narrative descriptions of peasant life create the impression that the land has not only invaded the blood of its inhabitants, and also frequently “reabsorbs” them in a dramatic fashion. In La luna e i falò, the peasant Valino finally succumbs to misery, murdering his family and setting fire to his house before committing suicide. Santa, a double agent, is discovered by the partisans and killed; her body is burnt on the hillside, mimicking the bonfires lit to ensure the fertility of the fields. The fact that Valino and Santa are welcomed back into the earth, their deaths inscribed within existing ritual structures, grants meaning to their demise. As Anguilla says when justifying his decision to return, “Ho girato abbastanza il mondo da sapere che tutte le carni sono buone e si equivalgono, ma è per questo che uno si stanca e cerca di mettere radici, di farsi terra e paese, perché la sua carne valga e duri qualcosa di più che un comune giro di stagione” (7). Mythical integration with the land thus offers a sense of continuity that wouldn’t

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60 Anguilla explains to Cinto that the older peasants believe that ritualistic bonfires will bring much needed rain.
otherwise be possible. “Un paese vuol dire non essere soli, sapere che nella gente, nelle piante, nella terra c’è qualcosa di tuo, che anche quando non ci sei resta ad aspettarti” (9).

Indeed, in his 1945 essay “Del mito, del simbolo e d’altro,” Pavese zeroes in on place as the key to understanding myth. Mythic place involves the convergence of the universal and the particular:

Ora, carattere, non dico della poesia, ma della fiaba mitica è la consacrazione dei luoghi unici, legati a un fatto a una gesta a un evento. A un luogo, tra tutti, si dà un significato assoluto, isolandolo nel mondo. Così sono nati i santuari. Così a ciascuno i luoghi dell'infanzia ritornano alla memoria; in essi accaddeo cose che li han fatti unici e li trascelgono sul resto del mondo con questo suggello mitico.

Ma il parallelo dell'infanzia chiarisce subito come il luogo mitico non sia tanto singolo, il santuario, quanto quello di nome comune, universale, il prato, la selva, la grotta, la spiaggia, la casa, che nella sua indeterminatezza evoca tutti i prati, le selve ecc., e tutti li anima del suo brivido simbolico. Neanche nella memoria dell'infanzia il prato, la selva, la spiaggia sono oggetti reali fra i tanti, ma bensì il prato, la spiaggia come ci si rivelarono in assoluto e diedero forma alla nostra immaginazione. (Letteratura americana 299)

Thus, myth translates the individual experience of place from our childhood into universal mythic locales, uniting the real and the imaginary. Pavese’s approach to nature always contains a quasi-fantastic dimension. It is not nature in and of itself that matters, but nature as an expression of eternal myths: “Pensavo che descrivere storie di contadini (sia pure psicanalizzati e trasfigurati) non basta ancora. Descrivere poi paesaggi è cretino. Bisogna che i paesaggi – meglio i luoghi, cioè l’albero, la casa, la vite, il sentiero, il burrone, ecc. – vivano come persone, come contadini, e cioè siano mitici” (qtd. in Lajolo 217-18). This anthropomorphized view of nature often results in a slippage between man and nature, such that the two begin to merge into one another in a literal, visceral way.

The transition from the individual to the universal is thus presented as the individual’s absorption by the universal.
The difficulties critics’ experienced in categorizing Pavese’s writing—difficulties that necessitated the creation of new generic terminology, like “symbolic realism”—serve as evidence of Pavese’s *bricolage*. Equally inspired by the likes of D’Annunzio, Leopardi, neorealism, Greek mythology, folklore, French existentialism, and the anthropological writings of Lévy-Bruhl, James Frazer, and Karl Kerényi (to name just a few), Pavese’s hodgepodge approach to representing World War II and postwar social concerns was undeniably perplexing to his contemporaries. At a moment when clear lines were being drawn between committed and uncommitted literature, Pavese’s position proved difficult to map. Nonetheless, I argue that his efforts to weave together the eternal and the historical, timeless ritual and contemporary politics, allowed him to subvert both anti-historical and overly-historical trends in postwar Italian literature. Already in the late 1940s, many Italian writers had decided that existing literary models were insufficient to deal with the particularity of postwar political and aesthetic concerns, and thus sought to invent new forms. Though Pavese expressed his own misgivings about the insularity of hermetic poetry, or the propagandistic potential of socialist realism, he was also determined, in proper *bricoleur* fashion, to use whatever materials were at hand in order to deal with both political and existential crises. In *La Luna e i falò*, Anguilla critiques the transient, disposal nature of American culture: “In America si faceva così – quando eri stufo di una cosa, di un lavoro, di un posto, cambiavi. Laggiù perfino dei paesi intieri con l’osteria, il municipio e i negozi adesso sono vuoti, come un camposanto” (103). Painful as the past may be, Pavese could not abide the thought of simply erasing it. By
simultaneously reconnecting with and transforming the past, rather than dismissing it as a lost cause, he believed writers could more effectively overcome dangerous social divides.

**Symbolic Realism**

The generic confusion of Pavese’s work led early critics to read his prose as either realist or symbolist, but rarely both, whereas more recent analysis has ceded that the term “symbolic realism” is the more appropriate moniker for his style. Pavese himself coined a version of the term in his diary: “Ci vuole la ricchezza d’esperienze del realismo a la profondità di sensi del simbolismo. Tutta l’arte è un problema di equilibrio fra due opposti” (Mestiere 166). However, the question remains: what is the position of myth vis-à-vis these two modes, symbolism and realism?

Pavese frequently expressed a preference for symbol over allegory; he viewed allegory as univocal and therefore limited, whereas symbols offered a multiplicity of meaning. And myth was firmly situated in the realm of the symbol: “Un mito è sempre simbolico; per questo non ha mai un significato univoco, allegorico, ma vive di una vita incapsulata che, a seconda del terreno e dell’umore che l’avvolge, può esplodere nelle più diverse e molteplici fioriture” (Letteratura americana 301). In an essay on Walt Whitman, he associates symbolism with transcendence, praising the symbolism of the American poets over and above the allegory of a Dante:

*Indirection* è quel modo per cui lo scrittore non sarà né descrittivo né epico, bensì trascendent. Con altre parole, simbolico. Giacché il nuovo simbolismo di Whitman e della sua generazione consisté proprio in questo: non le ambiziose

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61 “…il metodo tanto caro a Pavese, consistente nel ‘realismo simbolico,’ cioè nel filtrare la realtà attraverso la propria coscienza, per trarre da questo processo di razionalizzazione e di ‘riduzione a chiarezza’ conclusioni esistenziali di carattere generale” (Catalfamo, *Mito* 59).
strutture allegoriche d’intreccio e d’impostazione—quelle di un Bunyan o di un Dante, —ma una diversa realtà verbale, una sorta di doppia vista per cui dal singolo oggetto dei sensi avidamente assorbito e posseduto irradia come un alone d’inattesa spiritualità.” (Letteratura americana 184-85)

Most importantly, symbols—because they stem from myth—are more natural than allegories.\textsuperscript{62} They do not arise from academic study, but rather from the encounter with the simplest modes of human expression—the fable, the argument, and the prayer:

Ciò è tanto vero che di qualunque individuo, anche il più colto e creatore, si può sostenere che i simboli non si radicano tanto nei suoi incontri libreschi o accademicici, quanto nelle mitiche e quasi elementari scoperte d’infanzia, nei contatti umilissimi e inconsapevoli con le realtà quotidiane e domestiche che l’hanno accolto al principio: non l’alta poesia ma la fiaba, il litigio, la preghiera, non la grande pittura ma l’almanacco e la stampa, non la scienza ma la superstizione (Letteratura americana 311).

Though he wrote only two collections of actual poetry—\textit{Lavorare stanca} (his first book, published in 1936) and \textit{Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi} (published posthumously in 1951)—Pavese frequently elided the distinction between poetry and prose, and thus his theoretical reflections on poetry are just as applicable to his novels. His vision of poetry is indelibly linked to myth: “Far poesia significa portare a evidenza e compiutezza fantastica un germe mitico […] senza mito – l’abbiamo già ripetuto – non si dà poesia: mancherebbe l’immersione nel gorgo dell’indistinto, che della poesia ispirata è condizione indispensabile” (Letteratura americana 350, 338). However, he is careful not to lose sight of his commitment to reduce myth to clarity, to take irrationality as merely a starting point on the path to rational thought: “Ma significa anche, dando una corposa figura a questo germe, ridurlo a materia contemplativa, staccarlo dalla materna penombra della memoria, e in definitiva abituarsi a non crederci più, come a un mistero che non è

\textsuperscript{62} “Dobbiamo accettare i simboli – il mistero di ognuno – con la pacata convinzione con cui si accettano le cose naturali. La città ci dà simboli come la campagna ci dà frutti” (Letteratura americana 323).
Poetry, then, is the clarified, rationalized version of myth; it is the distilled and stylized product of a mythic germ.

In his reflections on Vico, Pavese’s vision of the relationship between myth and poetry is further developed. Though poetry is often considered more sophisticated than its mythic counterpart, Pavese, as a devotee of Vico, believed that “primitive” man was highly poetic, that myth and metaphor are in fact the fundamental modes of expression corresponding to the earliest stage of man. Furthermore, Pavese saw no contradiction between the almost childlike simplicity of myth and so-called high arts (i.e. the classics). In fact, in his diary, he conflates his classicist and primitivist tendencies: “Il tuo è un classicismo rustico che facilmente diventa etnografia preistorica” (255).

Similarly, he rejected the binary opposition of myth and logos so common to anthropological studies of myth: “mito e logos non sono necessariamente termini susseguenti di una sequenza evolutiva, ma piuttosto coesistono dialetticamente in uno stato di continua tensione” (Musumeci 82). This joining of seemingly opposed terms is a recurring theme in Pavese’s work and will be central to my efforts to connect his mythic and political impulses.

If, for Pavese, myth is linked to symbolism, and symbolism is linked to realism, then it follows that myth and realism are not diametrically opposed. On the contrary, myth is the means by which reality is most effectively accessed: “Il mito gli apparve con

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63 In an essay on Herman Melville, for example, Pavese discusses the superimposition of barbary and academicism in *Moby Dick*: “Un greco veramente è Melville. Voi leggete le evasioni europee dalla letteratura e vi sentite più letterato che mai, vi sentite piccino, cerebrale, effeminato. Leggete Melville, che non si vergogna di cominciare *Moby Dick*, il poema della vita barbara, con otto pagine di citazioni, e di andare innanzi discutendo, citando ancora…” (*Letteratura americana* xvii)
chiarezza come lo strumento privilegiato per cercare di comprendere la realtà” (Esposito 2). Rather than treating myth as unreal, he viewed it as a richer form of reality:

È evidente che tensione mitica significa la gioiosa certezza di una più ricca realtà sotto la realtà oggettiva – l’indistinta presenza del nuotatore nell’acqua – e questa presenza si esprime in vortici, schiume, affioramenti. Possibile che si dia simbolo, cioè la presenza mitica, anche nell’ormai secolare arte veristica, che sembrerebbe votata alla più piatta univocità? Senza dubbio, e anzitutto perché l’ispirazione veristica è la celebrazione di un grandioso mito collettivo. (*Letteratura americana* 337)

By defining “realism” as little more than the expression of collective myths, Pavese destabilizes the boundary between concrete reality and abstract symbolism. In his 1949 article “Raccontare è monotono,” he claims that the most symbolic (and therefore the most mythic) works are composed of solid reality: “Perciò i racconti più simbolici, più intrisi di mito – come di salsedine chi nuota – sono quelli che apparentemente non hanno un secondo senso che qua e là affiora, ma sono piuttosto un solido blocco di realtà, sufficiente in se stesso, aperto, se mai, a innumerevoli sensi che tutto lo intridono e interessano” (*Letteratura americana* 336).

In short, rather than abandoning history and reality in the name of myth and symbolism (or vice versa), Pavese sought to reconcile the two realms. He consistently spoke of writers as historically situated, and insisted that only those works of art that have some practical or historical relevance are of any interest, yet he also qualified these comments by alluding to the writer’s ability to escape his historical moment and speak “outside of time”: “Che ciascuno di noi – anche lo scrittore – sia radicato in una data situazione, in una classe, in uno storico conflitto inevitabile, è vero. Ma è vero, altrettanto che, quando si prende in mano la penna per narrare sul serio, tutto è già accaduto, si chiudono gli occhi e si ascolta una voce che è fuori dal tempo” (*Letteratura americana* 61).
Despite his desire to remain rooted in reality, he worried about the creative limitations posed by neorealism; as Binetti explains, “il neorealismo rappresenta allo stesso tempo per Pavese, proprio perché movimento artistico inglobante poetiche e tendenze di pensiero di per sé diverse, un limite alle potenzialità creative ed alla varietà di impostazioni della sua poetica” (*Vita imperfetta* 98). Nonetheless, he did admire the simple objectivity of neorealism, and in his introduction to a new translation of Homer’s *Iliad*, he compared neorealism to Homer’s poetics, thus once again uniting realism and myth.

By insisting on the intellectual operations that undergird fantasy, he suggested that fantasy (here used as a synonym for myth or symbol) has the potential to impose order onto the chaos of everyday reality, thus rendering it a potent political tool:

La fantasia non è l’opposto dell’intelligenza. La fantasia è l’intelligenza applicata a stabilire rapporti di analogia, di implicanza significativa, di simbolismo. Dicevo che essa sola costruisce, perché essa sola sfugge alla tirannia del reale *tranche de vie*, dell’evento naturalistico, e sostituisce alla legge del reale (che è assenza di costruzione, tanto à vero che esso non ha fine né principio) la favola, il racconto, il misto, costruzione dell’intelligenza. (*Mestiere* 241)

Fantasy offers a reprieve from the “tyranny” of reality, but not, I argue, in an escapist manner. Rather, Pavese sought to use myth as a vehicle to intervene in reality and thereby transform it: “libero è solamente chi s’inserisce nella realtà e la trasforma, non chi procede tra le nuvole. Del resto, nemmeno i rondoni ce la fanno a volare nel vuoto assoluto” (*Letteratura americana* 238). Fantasy is posited as an alternative to submitting to an oppressive fate.
Pavese’s Impegno

By now it should be clear that Pavese exhibited a strong commitment to myth as both a literary framework and a political tool, and that his particular definition of the term strayed from that of many other intellectuals of the period in its clever constellation of reality and symbol, history and eternity, man and nature. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen how his use of myth might be characterized as “committed” according to the standards operative in postwar Italy. The evidence of Pavese’s lack of political commitment is substantial: he showed little interest in politics during his formative years, despite the fact that most of his peers were avid antifascists and were jailed for their activities; his own experience in exile did little to increase his political fervor, as evidenced by his diary entries during the period and Il carcere, the novel based on his experiences in Brancaleone Calabro; many of his novels show a “regressive” interest in bourgeois life, rather than political dissidence; he failed to join the partisans in their fight against the remaining fascist forces during the second half of the war; his inscription in the Communist Party came at a moment when the danger of political opposition had largely passed and the PCI’s popularity was at its peak; many of his political articles for l’Unità read at best as naïve, and at worst as heavy-handed propaganda dictated by party

64 Works like Tra donne sole have been criticized as little more than drawing room dramas.
65 Recent work suggests that Pavese’s Communist leanings may have emerged earlier than previously thought: “Sinora si era ritenuto che l’accostamento di Pavese all’idea comunista fosse avvenuto nei giorni immediatamente successivi alla Liberazione. Ma recentemente Mariarosa Masoero ha documentato che lo scrittore era comunista già nella tanto contestata fase della sua vita trascorsa a Casale Monferrato” (Catalfamo, Dialectica 83) Even if this is true, it is difficult to argue with the claim that he was less “committed” to the revolutionary cause than his peers.
officials;\textsuperscript{66} and the works he deemed his best were the least obviously political (e.g. *Dialoghi con Leucò*).

Faced with this laundry list of sins, it would be easy to accept the image of Pavese as a lovesick misanthrope, more invested in his own existential crises than any sort of political or social cause. His diary does little to dissuade readers of this portrait; despite the fact that it covers the period from 1935-1950, he makes almost no mention of fascism or the war. Nonetheless, I maintain that Pavese’s status as an “engaged” writer has frequently been overlooked due to his particular mode of engagement: namely, mythology. In the following pages, I will demonstrate not only that Pavese’s work on myth was inextricably linked to political and social issues related to World War II and its aftermath, but also that his methods may have been more effective than the heavy-handed propaganda of other Communist writers of the period. Indeed, Pavese’s decision to focalize his social commentary through the lens of myth is in many ways the result of his dissatisfaction with existing methods of engagement.

Pavese recognized that he was somewhat out of sync with his moment. Defining history as an alternation between progressive and regressive tendencies—and more recently between hermeticism and neorealism—he demonstrated an attentiveness to the political forces working against him and the reasons why myth had been dismissed out of hand in the wake of World War II:

\textsuperscript{66} Catalfamo defends Pavese against the usual critiques of ideological slavery, insisting that Pavese, in “Dialoghi col compagno,” takes an important stance against the pedagogism of much popular literature: “Queste pagine [“Dialoghi col compagno”] sono state frettolosamente archiviate come esempi di ‘vassallaggio ideologico’ dello scrittore nei confronti del partito, ma, in realtà, contengono chiare prese di posizione contro il finto pedagogismo di tanta letteratura populista” (*Dialettica* 88). Unfortunately, this is the minority opinion.
Tutta la storia culturale degli ultimi secoli è in continuo altalenare, sotto etichette svariate, tra queste due poetiche [...] Si tratta del riflesso drammatico di una lotta politica, dell’oscillazione tra i momenti involutivi, d’arresto (=angelismo) e quelli progressivi, slanciati (=realismo). E anche l’affrontarsi di queste due posizioni negli anni intorno alla recente guerra mondiale – l’inaridirsi (non nella sola Italia) dell’angelismo ermetico, e l’imporsi e diffondersi soprattutto in Italia del cosiddetto neo-realismo, sono a modo loro un riflesso delle lotte e delle trasformazioni politiche in corso (Letteratura americana 357).

Nonetheless, in a 1950 radio interview, Pavese once again justified his decision to combine symbolism and realism, or distance and immediacy, citing myth as a means of communicating with the masses in a “current” way without sacrificing more universal themes:

Della civiltà umanistica quest’opera vuole (sia detto con tutta umiltà) conservare il distacco contemplative e formale, il gusto delle strutture intellettualistiche, la lezione dantesca e baudelairiana di un mondo stilisticamente chiuso e in definitiva simbolico. Della realtà contemporanea rendere il ritmo, la passione, il sapore, con la stessa casuale immediatezza di un Cellini, di un Defoe, di un chiacchierone incontrato al caffè. (Letteratura americana 293-94)

The convergence of symbolic formalism and café gossip is what makes Pavese’s language so unique—and, I argue, so effective. His mythic worldview resonated with the nonsynchronous experiences of rural Italians.

If we look to Pavese’s critical essays (most notably his early work on American authors), we find evidence of what he valued in others’ writing. Although it does not automatically follow that he took his own advice, we can use his criticism to form a clearer picture of his sense of the ethical obligations of writers. In a 1931 essay on Sherwood Anderson, for example, Pavese negates the validity of art for art’s sake,
affirming that literature must satisfy human needs. In his 1946 essay “Il Comunismo e gli intellettuali,” written in response to a survey issued by the PCI asking why writers had decided to join the party, he insists that:

Per uno scrittore, per un “operaio della fantasia,” che dieci volte in un giorno corre il rischio di credere che tutta la vita sia quella dei libri, dei suoi libri, è necessaria una cura continua di scossoni, di prossimo, di concreta realtà. Noi rispettiamo troppo il nostro mestiere, per illuderci che l’ingegno, l’invenzione, ci bastino. Nulla che valga può uscirci dalla penna e dalle mani se non per urto, per urto con le cose a con gli uomini. Libero è solamente che s’inserisce nella realtà e la trasforma, non chi procede tra le nuvole. (Letteratura americana 238)

Thus, his pessimistic and abstract impulses were invariably tempered by his belief in the curative properties of concrete reality.

This “collision with things and men” translates to solidarity with the people (as opposed to those intellectuals who, well-intentioned though they may have been, were ultimately condescending in their efforts to “educate” the masses). Pavese worried that the impulse to speak to the masses without truly communing with them would lead us back to fascism:


67 “L’opera d’arte ci commuove e ci si lascia comprendere soltanto finché conserva per noi un interesse storico, finché risponde a un qualche nostro problema, risolve insomma un nostro bisogno di vita pratica. Non esiste arte per l’arte” (Letteratura americana 33).
Merely going towards the people, rather than being with them, is not only disingenuous—it is also a dangerous path to despotism. And being with the masses requires the writer to embrace their worldviews—their traditions, superstitions, and myths.

Yet Pavese also explicitly connected his mythic literary aspirations with more properly Marxist definitions of labor. Art, he writes, is not a realm set apart from everyday reality, but rather emerges directly from other (more concrete) forms of labor. In a 1946 essay “Maturità americana,” he expressed admiration for F.O. Matthiessen’s proposal of an organic union between labor and culture and posited that the way to achieve this union was by deploying a language that breaks down the barrier between things and words, between ordinary life and mythic reality: “quello che implicitamente importa: esigenza di un nuovo linguaggio che, distruggendo le barriere fra cose e parole, investa di luce spirituale i più ordinari aspetti della vita quotidiana e ne rivelì la profonda natura simbolica. […] Arrivare a un linguaggio che tanto s’identificasse alle cose da abbattere ogni barriera fra il comune lettore e la realtà simbolica e mitica più vertiginosa” (Letteratura americana 179-80). He saw myth as indelibly linked to the techne of the common worker, and he felt duty-bound to communicate to these workers their role within a symbolic-mythic reality. In nearly all of his discussions of myth, the term is tied to historically grounded subjects and to a more “common” language, thus allowing him to steer clear of decadentism and align himself with the masses.

As a means of achieving his desired communion with the people, Pavese agreed to write for the Communist newspaper L’Unità, yet refused to collaborate with Vittorini on his Communist journal Il Politecnico, a fact that has struck many scholars as strangely
contradictory. However, the decision is logical when one takes into account the intended readership of each project: Vittorini, though more overtly political than Pavese, preferred to write in terms of abstractions, for an elite, “intellectual” reader, whereas l’Unità was written for the masses. Thus, Pavese’s commitment to reaching as broad an audience as possible led him to choose the latter. Even if we admit to certain contradictions within his publishing decisions, I disagree with the reading of Pavese as uncommitted simply due to the occasional ideological inconsistency. As Binetti claims, Pavese’s willingness to verbalize doubts and inconsistencies ultimately presented a more honest portrait of the postwar political landscape than the consistent (but borderline propagandistic) compositions of those who upheld the myth of the Resistance in an effort to buttress the PCI’s position in the new government.⁶⁸

In terms of the “contradictions” by which critics define Pavese’s output, one of the most notable is that between existential crisis (associated with solitude, an inability to “commit” to one’s fellow man, a privileging of individual concerns over collective ones) and sociopolitical engagement. And yet, Sartrean *engagement* is a logical extension of existentialism, thus invalidating this dichotomy. In his 1960 essay “Pavese: essere e fare,” Calvino insists that Pavese, by choosing to live tragically (rather than voluptuously), wanted to transform “il fuoco d’una tensione esistenziale in un operare storico” (61). Thus, once again irrationality, destiny, and isolated existential crisis comprise merely one step in a larger dialectical process. In fact, Pavese’s attraction to

⁶⁸ “Questa dialettica testimonia invece la volontà sincera di un intellettuale impegnato che preferiva comunicare al suo lettore anche le incertezze e le conflittualità intrinseche nel dibattito politico-culturale di quel tempo, anziché travestirle discorsi tautologici falsamente coerenti e celebrativi” (Binetti, *Vita imperfetta* 86).
myth and destiny was in part motivated by his dissatisfaction with the limitations of political dogma and his desire to protect individual liberty from programmatic ideology.\textsuperscript{69}

Reflecting on the vitriolic rhetoric of revolution, Pavese writes:

\begin{quote}
A sentire, non esistono ora che gli impulsi alle rivoluzioni violente. Ma tutto nella storia è rivoluzione; anche un rinnovamento, una scoperta impercettibili e pacifici. Via quindi anche il preconceito oratorio del rinnovamento morale che ha bisogno (magari da parte di altri, gli attivi) dell’azione violenta. Via questo bisogno infantile di compagnia e di fracasso. Io devo contentarmi della minima scoperta contenuta in ogni singola poesia, e mostrare il mio rinnovam. morale nell’umiltà con cui mi sottopongo a questo destino, che è la mia natura. Che è molto ragionevole. Se non è però pigrizia o vigliaccheria. (\textit{Mestiere} 13)
\end{quote}

The final phrase demonstrates Pavese’s awareness of the accusations that would be leveled against him for failing to embody the revolutionary fervor of his peers and indicates some doubt about the authenticity of his own sentiments. Nonetheless, his insistence that moral rejuvenation can be located in a poem or myth, rather than solely in triumphant rhetoric, reveals a new possibility for literary commitment.

For Pavese, writing about history and politics did not mean drawing grandiose teleological conclusions. In his review of a book by Pino Levi Cavalgione, he bemoans the quality of most of the literature of the Resistance—with the exception of Cavaglione’s book, which he praises for its ability to avoid historical lessons: “Con la stessa sicurezza egli ha escluso dal racconto ogni sforzo di giustificazione storica, ogni enfasi costruttiva e simbolica, ogni sondaggio in profondo, che mirasse a far del libro un piccolo \textit{Guerra e pace}. […] Non predica, non fa la lezione di storia o di eroismo, né a sé

\textsuperscript{69} For example, Pavese frowned upon the naïve optimism of those who hailed industrialization as the solution to all social woes: “Non si riconosce, invece, nell’ottimismo sfinato del socialismo riformista, di stampo positivista, che punta tutto sull’industrializzazione, sul rapporto privilegiato tra industriali e classe operaia, che tagli fuori non solo il Sud, ma anche tutto il mondo contadino del Nord” (Catalfamo, \textit{Dialettica} 263).
né agli altri” (*Letteratura americana* 268). Avoiding melodramatic images of partisan heroism, Pavese chose instead to represent reality as he saw it: an often bleak (but never fatalistic) convergence of mythical and political forces.

The pessimistic elements of Pavese’s prose are undeniable and are one of the main reasons critics have been so quick to compare him to Leopardi.\(^{70}\) Catalfamo, however, rehabilitates this pessimism by dubbing it an *active* pessimism: “Pavese è un ‘pessimista,’ ma il suo è un ‘pessimismo attivo,’ leopardiano, nel senso ch’egli ritiene che, nonostante il destino, l’uomo deve prendere posizione, deve agire per il bene di tutti, in particolare dei più deboli” (*Dialettica* 262). While acknowledging his fatalistic streak, most evident in his discussion of destiny in peasant life, Catalfamo underscores Pavese’s refusal to give in to nihilism: “Ma, accanto al ‘destino,’ c’è la ‘speranza.’ È vero: per Pavese nelle vicende umane si ripropongono paradigmi di una catastrofe inevitabile. Ciononostante, non viene meno l’obbligo di assumere una posizione etica, non viene annullata la responsabilità personale” (*Dialettica* 261). For Pavese, rebelling against destiny is an ethical act, an expression of personal responsibility, and thus a form of *engagement*.

**The Ethnographic Connection**

If “committed” writers like Sartre, Vittorini, and Calvino were critical touchstones for Pavese, his relationship with ethnographer Ernesto de Martino was no less so. As co-editors of the “collana viola,” a series of ethnographic publications for Einaudi, Pavese

\(^{70}\) For more on the parallels between Pavese and Leopardi, see Arnaldo Colombo’s *Santo Stefano Belbo e Recanati Leopardi e Cesare Pavese* (2000) and Michela Rusi’s *Le malvage analisi: sulla memoria leopardiana di Cesare Pavese* (1988).
and de Martino were able to combine their respective research on the political and economic utility of myth.\textsuperscript{71} I argue that Pavese’s novels are in many ways a fictional application of de Martino’s theories, a means of exploring communal solutions to individual, existential afflictions.

Sometimes referred to as the Italian equivalent of Marcel Mauss or Bronislaw Malinowski, De Martino studied classics and comparative religion at the University of Naples. Initially a devotee of Croce, he soon turned away from Croce’s idealism in favor of an eclectic theoretical-philosophical orientation inflected by Gramsci, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. At the end of the 1940s, he began active fieldwork in Southern Italy, investigating social environments where belief in magic, myth, and ritual continued to thrive. De Martino is an intriguing figure not only because of his continued interest in myth after the war, but also because he consciously sought to integrate anthropology and Marxism, two fields largely considered incompatible. According to Croce, modern men take an active stance toward their world and their history, whereas primitive men remain passive and accepting of their circumstances. Consequently, they are without history, without the spontaneity of spirit (consciousness) that is mediated by the flow of historical action and thought. De Martino, however, was critical of this ethnocentric position.

Though he suffered some abuse from hardline Marxists due to his supposed “irrational” streak, his on-the-ground investigations in Southern Italy superimposed analyses of myth,\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{71} La Collezione di studi religiosi, etnologici e psicologici, nicknaked the “collana viola” due to the color of the volumes’ covers, was edited by Einaudi from 1948 to 1956. Through this series, Pavese and de Martino oversaw Italian translations of works by the likes of Jung, Lévy-Bruhl, Malinowski, Frazer, Eliade, and Durkheim, among others. I should note that several of de Martino’s most famous works, including \textit{Sud e magia} and \textit{La terra del rimorso}, were published after Pavese died, and thus obviously could not have influenced his fiction. Nonetheless, \textit{Il mondo magico}, published in 1948, already laid the groundwork for many of de Martino’s later theories.
religion, and superstition onto a vested interest in improving the social and economic plight of the peasants.

In a 1950 article in *Cultura a realtà*, Pavese defended de Martino against criticisms from writer Franco Fortini and reiterated the connection between ethnology and socialism:

> Dice Ernesto de Martino, autore illustre del *Mondo magico*, che ormai tutto è chiaro: il folclore, l’etnologia, che studiano quanto è primitivo, arcaico, nella psiche e nel costume dei popoli, possono soltanto fiorire genuini in una società che dei popoli ‘subalterni’ faccia il soggetto della sua politica, una società che socialisticamente organizzzi questi popoli diseredati e ne rivendichi l’arcaica originalità d’istituzioni e di valori. (*Letteratura americana* 353)

Though the two writers did not always see eye-to-eye as spearheads of their editorial project—de Martino had doubts about Pavese’s fascination with irrationality, despite enduring similar criticisms—they shared a commitment to the thorough, “scientific” study of subjects like myth, ritual, and the unconscious.\(^\text{72}\)

Much of de Martino’s research centers on what he called the “crisis of presence”—a sense of not being there (*Dasein*). It is a feeling of death, but also of lost subjectivity, vulnerability, alienation, dissociation, being out of control, being overwhelmed to the point of extinction, and, most importantly, being outside of history. The circumstances of primitive and subaltern peoples, he argues, render them more vulnerable to these crises of presence; “primitive” rituals, such as curing rites and mourning ceremonies, are a means of restoring to the afflicted a sense of presence, of

\(^{72}\) There was some question as to how “scientific” the volumes in the series truly were, though these doubts may have been politically motivated: many of the authors they published had, at one point or another, been labeled as fascist, racist, and/or counter-revolutionary. It’s true that Eliade, for example, had ties to the Fascist Party, but even with less obvious targets like Frazer and Durkheim, there was hostility toward the notion of myth and religion as anything other than a socioeconomic by-product. Pavese defended his choice of authors by insisting that a writer’s personal beliefs did not invalidate his scientific contributions.
being there, vitally, in the world. In short, de Martino sees mythic practices as a means of resolving (or at the very least alleviating) otherwise insurmountable psychic conflicts. Through mythical-ritual practices, personal conflicts are rearticulated in a shared, depersonalized discourse.⁷³ And whereas the repetitions of myth and ritual are often seen as antithetical to historical temporality, de Martino argues that, “ripetizione ritmica, sicura e prevedibile al pari dell’orbita di un pianeta” provides “un ridischiudersi alla esistenza storica” (Terra 135). Myth involves a momentary escape from history, but only as a means of reconnecting with one’s cultural heritage in order to locate existing solutions to seemingly insurmountable, historically contingent problems. As Fabrizio Ferrari explains, “The ritual performer engages with ritual because he/she seeks a solution to aspects of life perceived as uneven. Such a solution, however, does not exist in reality. It must be found in an alternative dimension, a reality that has already happened: myth” (79). This retreat into mythic a-historicism paradoxically restores historical equilibrium.⁷⁴

Though classical Marxist theory views ritual as exploitative and/or externally imposed (and thus as an impediment to equality), de Martino argues that myth and ritual “make it possible for the performers, who become protagonists of their own history, to leave the condition of subalternity” (Ferrari 83). In fact, for the most disenfranchised,

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⁷³ *La terra del rimorso*, for example, is a sustained study of the rituals associated with tarantism. De Martino argues that tarantism “costituiva un dispositivo simbolico mediante il quale un contenuto psichico conflittuale che non aveva trovato soluzione sul piano della coscienza, e che operava null’oscurità dell’inconscio […] veniva evocato e configurato sul piano mitico-rituale” (76).

⁷⁴ This is yet another version of Caillois’ claim that the festival returns us to a mythic temporality as a means of rejuvenating the present world. In both cases we see a-temporality deployed to overcome the death and decay characteristic of temporality. It is worth noting that Caillois published a revised version of his essay “Festival” in 1950; in his new ending, he insisted that war was the twentieth-century’s response to the festival.
myth and ritual are the only political tools at their disposal. Furthermore, though he often focused on individual existential crises—the death of a loved one, marital woes, etc.—he also suggested that a nation is equally susceptible to crises of presence (Ferrari 78). It is this aspect of de Martino’s thought that Pavese latched onto—the ways in which myth and ritual might address the trauma of fascism and its aftermath. In *La luna e i falò*, we encounter characters still grappling with the consequences of the war, buckling beneath the weight of crises of presence, yet Pavese offers them a means of escape—and thus a means of re-entering history—via a mythic connection with the land.

**From Burning Fields to Burning Bodies**

*La luna e i falò*, Pavese’s final novel, is also frequently cited as his most fully developed, and as the work that most effectively integrates his two competing impulses: myth and engagement. While numerous critics have noted the presence of both of these strands in the novel, they are typically analyzed in isolation from one another. By contrast, I am not merely arguing that both myth and politics appear in the novel; I maintain that myth is political, that myth is the vehicle through which he addresses social issues. Pavese positioned the novel as the final installment of a historical tetralogy: “il ciclo storico: *Carcere* (antifascismo confinario), *Compagno* (antifascismo clandestino),

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75 “*La luna e i falò* è l’opera della piena maturità letteraria di Cesare Pavese, licenziata poco prima della tragica fine, e rappresenta il punto di sbocco di tutta la produzione precedente, ch’essa comprende e supera, concludendo l’itinerario artistico ed ‘ideologico’ dello scrittore langarolo” (Catalfamo, *Dialettica* 247).
76 To cite only one example, Biasin acknowledges that the characters in *La luna e i falò* “are the mouthpiece of [Pavese’s] own irresolute but spontaneous political engagement,” but he immediately qualifies his own remarks, concluding that “he dealt with the asocial side of man, the crisis of the individual torn from society and contemporary reality: solitude, the inability to communicate which is suffered and yet at the same time self-determined, the contemplativity of the writer isolated in his ivory tower yet tormented by awareness and remorse that this tower of his (as Virginia Woolf wrote) would henceforth overlook burning fields on all sides” (“Myth and Death” 206).
His decision to focus on the postwar climate, rather than the resistance itself, is part of what makes *La luna e i falò* so striking: he rejects the myth of the resistance still being promulgated in 1950, instead revealing the shortcomings of the resistance efforts—evident in the perpetuation of violence and misery even after the war—and the naiveté of revolutionary sentiment, especially in rural communities where the war was merely the latest iteration in a long history of violence and oppression. If *La casa in collina* depicts the optimism that briefly galvanized partisans in 1943, *La luna e i falò* tackles the disappointing aftermath and a return to the realities of peasant life following the unreality of war.

The novel is focalized through the character of Anguilla, a bastard who grew up in the Langhe hills. He departs for America (we later learn it is because his antifascist activities have been discovered) and returns to Italy after the Liberation. The novel can be divided into roughly three sections: his boyhood, first at Gaminella, the family farm, then as a worker at the larger farm of La Mora; his time in America during the war; and his return to Italy and rediscovery of his home. His childhood friend, Nuto, (loosely based on Pavese’s real-life friend Pinolo Scaglione) informs him of the fates of the various residents of the area and the effects (or lack thereof) of the war. Interlacing Communist ideology and rural superstitions, this novel, more than any other, brings together each of the components of Pavese’s definition of myth into one unified vision.

As previously discussed, Pavese’s approach to myth was rooted in the natural world; nature both engenders myth and preserves it against modernity’s contamination. In *La luna e i falò*, it is nature (rather than Communism) that appears as the great equalizer: “Cosa credi? La luna c’è per tutti, così le piogge, così le malattie. Hanno un bel vivere in
un buco o in un palazzo, il sangue è rosso dappertutto” (72). When formal politics fails, the land retains its potential for signification and liberation. Anguilla begins his tale with a reflection on the necessity of roots: “Ho girato abbastanza il mondo da sapere che tutte le carni sono buone e si equivalgono, ma è per questo che uno si stanca e cerca di mettere radici, di farsi terra e paese, perché la sua carne valga e duri qualcosa di più che un comune giro di stagione” (7). However, the autochthonous vision of man that Pavese provides is hardly a romantic one. As a farmhand, Anguilla learns early on that his livelihood depends on the fertility of the land. The crops prove to be dangerously unreliable, thus pointing to the potential hostility of nature, though it is ultimately man who poses the largest threat: Valino, who now inhabits Gaminella, is forced to turn over the vast majority of his already meager harvest to the landowner, thus leaving him and his family in a state of borderline starvation. In a desperate effort to subsist from year to year, the farmers succumb to what Anguilla dubs “superstition” by lighting bonfires in the fields as a means of ritualistically ensuring fertility for the coming year. Anguilla is skeptical of this practice (having worked as a fertilizer salesman): “Era inutile che [Nuto] trovasse tanto da dire sul governo e sui discorsi dei preti se poi credeva a queste superstizioni come i vecchi di sua nonna” (39). Nuto, however, defends their beliefs, identifying the reasoning behind the ritual, rather than the ritual itself, as the central concern: “superstizione è soltanto quella che fa del male, e se uno adoperasse la luna e i falò per derubare i contadini e tenerli all’oscurro, allora sarebbe lui l’ignorante e bisognerebbe fucilarlo in piazza” (40). If the moon and bonfires are used for noble purposes, they no longer qualify as ignorant. Indeed, Nuto is a believer in the practical power of these rituals: “non sapeva cos’era, se il calore o la vampa o che gli umori si
svegliassero, fatto sta che tutti i coltivi dove sull’orlo si accendeva il falò davano un raccolto più succoso, più vivace” (39). Yet in the end, the ritual does not really exist to improve the quality of the harvest, but rather to provide powerless individuals with a sense of control and an image or practice around which their community can cohere. This is ritual as theorized by de Martino, whose function is to help the subaltern overcome crises of presence.

Thankfully, nature is not a purely destructive force; it also offers positive experiences. As a boy, Anguilla delights in the simple pleasures available around the farm: exploring the hills, catching frogs, picking apples. Even after his return, his primary activity is wandering the land, commenting on the similarities from his childhood (the shape of the hills, the smell of the earth), as well as the differences (the hazel trees have been cut down). He continues to feel connected to his native soil, a bond he was unable to form in America. There, he shied away from the vast expanses of land—“Molti paesi vuol dire nessuno” (45)—and was frightened of the stars, different than those back home. After breaking down in the desert one night, the threat of a relentlessly indifferent nature, so unlike the one that birthed him, strikes fear into his heart: “Più avanti nella notte una grossa cagnara mi svegliò di soprassalto. Sembrava che tutta la pianura fosse un campo di battaglia, o un cortile. C’era una luce rossastra, scesi fuori intirizzito e scassato; tra le nuvole basse era spuntata una fetta di luna che pareva una ferita di coltello e insanguinava la pianura. Rimasi a guardarla un pezzo. Mi fece davvero spavento” (48).

While working at a restaurant, he meets a fellow Piedmont native, and their conversation opens with a nostalgic desire for the region’s wine (and thus for the particularity of the Piedmontese earth). His village holds a quasi-mythic sway over him—but not in the form
of an inescapable destiny. Instead, he feels a political devotion to his people and returns to them in part to improve their economic plight—though without trampling on their traditions.

Childhood occupies the bulk of the novel, either in the form of Anguilla’s memories or in his interactions with Cinto, the crippled boy who now lives in his former farmhouse. Cinto represents a sort of repetition with a difference; upon meeting him for the first time, Anguilla reflects, “vederlo su quell’aia era come vedere me stesso” (24). But Nuto points out that Cinto is even worse off than Anguilla had been, both due to his physical infirmity (he has difficulty walking due to rickets) and the increased demands of the landlord. Anguilla reflects that even though he did not always have enough to eat as a child, they rarely went without some sort of supper, a boast that Cinto is unable to make.

Anguilla therefore decides to take Cinto under his wing, determined to help him escape the poverty and oppression into which he had been born, just as Anguilla did. He buys him a pocketknife in order to win the boy’s trust; the knife plays a key role at the novel’s conclusion, when Cinto menaces Valino with it in order to escape his murderous rampage. Anguilla likewise tries to impart some sense of social awareness to him by describing the larger world and thereby piquing his interest in a different lifestyle (though it is unclear to what extent the boy is moved by these conversations). When Cinto is left an orphan following Valino’s murder-suicide, Anguilla convinces Nuto to take him on as an apprentice carpenter, hoping that the acquisition of a trade will ease his transition out of the desperate agrarian life. Throughout these interactions, Anguilla never denigrates the peasants’ devotion to a hostile land (despite their desperate situation), instead striving to integrate tradition and innovation.
If we keep in mind Pavese’s emphasis on the recurrence of experiences (rather than their first iteration), we can see why Cinto’s boyhood is of even greater importance to Anguilla than his own. Seeing Gaminella and the surrounding area as a well-traveled adult, the experiences of his youth acquire a mythic significance that he failed to observe the first time. However, this mythic glow goes hand-in-hand with a finely tuned political conscience that Anguilla lacked in his early years. Even while reflecting on the timeless, ritualistic nature of his home, he recognizes (with Nuto’s help) the economic disparity created by the exploitation of farmers.\(^\text{77}\)

This specific social issue was not selected at random. Agricultural inequality was a major concern in Italy, both before and after the war. In Southern Italy in particular, the unreliability of the land, combined with widespread corruption, made eking out a living nigh impossible. In the mid-to-late 1940s, extensive peasant agitations and land occupations in the South led to promises of agrarian reform, but there were few long-term results; by 1950, the peasant cooperatives had been disbanded, protestors were being shot, and wealthy landowners had swayed legislation in their favor.\(^\text{78}\) Both Nuto and Anguilla reveal a certain pessimism in their political reflections, echoing many intellectuals’ growing disillusionment with the failure of the government to follow through on promised changes. In Catalfamo’s reading:

[Nuto] è proiezione narrativa di quella parte fortemente ideologizzata della sinistra che giudica la Resistenza un fallimento, perché non ha cambiato i rapporti sociali, cosicché, dopo la cacciata dei nazi-fascisti, tutto è tornato come prima, o quasi. Esprime la delusione subita da una parte della base della sinistra dopo la rottura dei

\(^\text{77}\)“Adesso il casotto l’ha comprato la madama della Villa e viene a spartire i raccolti con la bilancia… Una che ha già due cascine e il negozio. Poi dicono i villani ci rubano, i villani sono gente perverse…” (23).

\(^\text{78}\)Paul Ginsborg offers an extensive analysis of postwar agrarian reform in Chapter 4 of *A History of Contemporary Italy* (1990).
governi di unità nazionale e la sconfitta nelle elezioni del 18 aprile 1948, che danno alla DC di De Gasperi la maggioranza assoluta. (*Dialettica* 262)

Biasin instead identifies Valino as the locus of this postwar disillusionment:

> In Valino is concentrated, physically first and them emblematically, the failure of the Resistance to shatter the *mezzadria*, a typical Italian agricultural and bourgeois institution, which has only recently been modified by the impetus of industrialization, and yet, even after the Second World War, it was often synonymous with exploitation and misery, especially in the not very fertile regions of the Langhe hills, and presented a continual source of stifled bitterness among the social classes. (“Myth and Death” 189)

In short, for many Italians, especially the poorest, life was not dramatically different after the fall of fascism. Nuto states that there was a brief moment during the war when “s’era fatto qualcosa,” when the peasants were waking up to their exploitation, but almost immediately following the Liberation, things went downhill; now the townspeople declare that, “tutti i partigiani erano degli assassini” (54, 49). Thus, we might read Pavese’s decision to draw on myth, with its fixed and timeless qualities, not as a rejection of contemporary social issues, but rather a critique of the inefficacy of PCI policy. Myth, with its sense of an immutable fate unaffected by historical events, effectively captured the reality of the postwar Italian peasant experience. And though myth may not be able to force fallow lands to bear fruit, at the very least it can provide a sense of belonging.

The mythic temporality of the novel reveals itself not only through generational repetition, represented by Cinto, and agricultural repetition, represented by seasonal and agricultural fixity, but also through the framing of World War II as simply one piece of a larger cycle of oppression and violence. When reflecting on the war, the peasants seem unsurprised by the horrific events that occurred, and in fact construct narratives connecting those events to older, even more severe forms of violence:
E una volta, dicevano i vecchi, era stato ancora peggio – una volta si ammazzavano, si davano coltellate –, sulla strada di Camo c’era ancora la croce a uno strapiombo dove avevano fatto ribaltare un bircocino con due dentro. Ma adesso ci aveva pensato il governo con la politica a metterli d’accordo: c’era stata l’epoca dei fascisti che picchiavano chi volevano, d’accordo coi carabinieri, e più nessuno si muoveva. I vecchi dicevano che adesso era meglio. (75)

When Anguilla brings the war up with Valino, he merely shrugs and responds: “Non hanno fruttato da vivi. Non fruttano da morti” (30). Even Nuto links the everyday violence of peasant children to the emergence of political violence. After taking a lizard away from two boys who are tormenting it, he comments: “E poi, si comincia così, si finisce con scannarsi e bruciare i paesi” (21). The daily beatings endured by the likes of Cinto and his female relatives, as well as the abuse suffered by Irene, one of the sisters from La Mora, nearly eclipse the violence of the war period. Thus, the perpetuation of violence even after the war lends it a sense of timelessness and naturalness that calls into question the singularity of World War II.79

An implacable sense of destiny pervades the landscape of La luna e i falò. The only changes wrought by the war are that the priest now has a new platform upon which to consolidate his power; when murdered fascists are discovered in the hills, he uses the opportunity to stir up anti-Communist sentiment, offering to perform funerals for the fascists, but refusing the same right to murdered partisans. Indeed, the economic inequality of the community seems built into the very land and the blood of its residents. Nonetheless, there are important moments of rebellion within the novel. Valino’s

79 Pavese makes an overt connection between the war and nature when he describes Valino’s attitude toward the war: “Non mise disgusto nella voce, né pietà. Sembrava parlassi di andare a funghi, o a fascine” (30). The war had been integrated into his daily routine as seamlessly as the other chores on the farm.
decision to burn down his home and murder his family, for example, can be viewed through a political lens, wherein his violence assumes the form of social protest:

Il Valino […] dà fuoco alla Gaminella non per rivoltarsi agli dei, ma per protestare contro l’ingiustizia economico-sociale voluta dagli uomini. Ne La luna e i falò, il pessimismo ‘metastorico’ conosce una compensazione, seppur precaria e relativa: se il destino è ineluttabile, vale, comunque, la pena di opporsi ad esso per ragioni etiche, di lottare contro l’ingiustizia. (Catalfamo, Dialettica 262)\(^\text{80}\)

Likewise, the fact that Cinto manages to escape from the tragedy that claims his family (in part by threatening his father with the knife Anguilla purchased for him) suggests that destiny can be combatted. Catalfamo goes so far as to read Cinto’s story as one of liberation:

Quella di Cinto è, infatti, una storia esemplare di liberazione da un triplice giogo: la sofferenza fisica, in quanto zoppo, la miseria economica, l’oppressione familiare. Il coltello che Cinto brandisce contro il Valino, quando questi vuole ucciderlo, è una sorta di simbolo di ribellione al destino, all’autorità atavica dei padri, che hanno diritto di vita e di morte sui figli. In conclusione, tra la soggezione alle leggi inesorabili della natura e l’onnipotenza dell’io, su cui si fonda certa propaganda politico-ideologica, Pavese trova una ‘terza via,’ quella che valorizza la responsabilità individuale, l’eticità della persona, che, comunque, deve distinguere il bene dal male, deve praticare il primo ed aborrire il secondo, forzando la mano al destino. (Dialettica 266-67)

Biasin even argues (though less convincingly) that Santa’s dual role as both fascist and partisan spy assumes the form of rebellion: “By making a mistake, [Santa] finally transformed her destiny into freedom: she betrayed both fascists and partisans, but only in an effort to understand, to be herself, disregarding and transcending historical contingency” (“Myth and Death” 201). Thus, despite Pavese’s pessimism in his portrayal

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\(^{80}\) In Pavese’s own description of Valino, he is careful to note that it is impotent rage, not wine, that leads him to beat his family: “Nuto mi disse che dalla piano del Belbo si sentivano le donne urlare quando il Valino si toglieva la cinghia e le frustava come bestie, e frustava anche Cinto – non era il vino, non ne avevano tanto, era la miseria, la rabbia di quella vita senza sfogo” (42).
of destiny, he never cedes to resignation. On the contrary, Nuto advocates active rebellion against even the most seemingly intractable situations—even to the point of self-destruction. In fact, he mentions active resistance and destiny in the same breath: “Ma anche a lui che non si è mosso è toccato qualcosa, un destino – quella sua idea che le cose bisogna capirle, aggiustarle, che il mondo è mal fatto e che a tutti interessa cambiarlo” (33). Destiny, then, becomes the impetus for action rather than an impediment to it.\textsuperscript{81} And though myth and destiny are closely linked, myth as a narrative structure assumes a strange equalizing power that allows some level of transcendence of destined social inequality. When discussing the novels he borrowed from the girls at La Mora, Anguilla is shocked to discover that the stories are the same as those he was told as a child: “A me questi romanzi piacevano, me possibile che piacessero anche a Irene, a Silvia, a loro ch’erano signore e non avevano mai conosciuta la Virgilia né pulito la stalla? Capii che Nuto aveva davvero ragione quando diceva che vivere in un buco o in un palazzo è lo stesso, che il sangue è rosso dappertutto, e tutti vogliono esser ricchi, innamorati, far fortuna” (116). For farmhands and ladies alike, fantasy offers a chance at liberation.

Though initial readings of the novel were primarily in the realist vein (and thus highly critical of Pavese’s portrayal of political impotence), symbolic analyses are now more common. Biasin offers a thorough summary of the wide range of symbolic readings

\textsuperscript{81} Biasin notes that Anguilla and Nuto are in many ways foils to one another, with Anguilla embodying passive characteristics and Nuto active ones. Nuto criticizes Anguilla’s acceptance of (and even delight in) the repetition that defines peasant life: “Per me, delle stagioni eran passate, non degli anni. Più le cose e i discorsi che me toccavano eran gli stessi di una volta […] più me facevano piacere. […] Qui Nuto diceva che avevo torto, che dovevo ribellarmi che su quelle colline si facesse ancora una vita bestiale, inumana, che la guerra non fosse servita a niente, che tutto fosse come prima, salvo i morti” (42).
contained merely in the two elements of the novel’s title.\textsuperscript{82} Rather than repeating his interpretive work, I will turn my attention instead to the text’s final bonfire, which I read as an image operating both inside and outside of history.

Anguilla devotes a considerable amount of time to describing his childhood experiences with the three girls who live at La Mora. The novel culminates with Nuto’s revelation of the fate of the youngest sister, Santa: she is identified as a double agent, executed by the partisans, and burned on a pyre in the hills, thus superimposing a mythical practice onto a historically precise moment. The novel concludes with Nuto’s observation that, “L’alt’anno c’era ancora il segno, come il letto di un falò” (132). The fact that Santa, who loses her life due to contemporary political intrigue, is ultimately destroyed through an ancient, mythic practice sums up in one potent symbol the interpenetration of politics and myth in Pavese’s imagination. Brian Moloney aptly points out that bonfires serve a dual purpose: they may be either destructive or restorative (120). Thus, the destruction wrought by both the fire at Gaminella and the one on the hill contains within it the possibility of rejuvenation.\textsuperscript{83}

By adopting a mythic framework, Pavese is able to see beyond immediate political concerns in order to insert his historical moment into a larger human narrative and

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{The Moon and the Bonfires}, in fact, contains, even in the title, various symbolic references embedded in the two image which compose it: the moon as cycle of nature and the seasons, the bonfires as moments of human time, as an echo of escapism, joy and festivals (already mythical) for the young narrator, and as a sacred part of human activity and work (in that they serve to awaken the earth, they are also the ancient propitiatory rites); the moon as an impassive force of destiny, the bonfires as man’s acts—of destructive violence (Valino burns his own house in rebellion against an unfair destiny), and of compassionate love (Baracca and Nuto burn Santa consecrating individuality in the face of destiny); the moon as immanence, the bonfires as transcendence” (“Myth and Death” 202-03).

\textsuperscript{83} There are numerous examples of anthropological theories in which destruction and excess are characterized as restorative behaviors. Roger Caillois’ work on festivals is perhaps the most useful here insofar as Pavese frequently featured festivals in his writings; \textit{La luna e i falò} both begins and ends with a fair, odd bookends to an otherwise violent narrative. Caillois maintains that the festival returns us to a mythic temporality as a means of rejuvenating the present world.
imagine an alternative future—one in which destruction cedes to rejuvenation. Myth thus becomes a source of liberty, a means of transcending the divide between the individual and the social, the particular and the universal. Enzo Noé Girardi views this effort at transcendence as the key difference between Pavese and Leopardi (despite the numerous parallels drawn between the two poets); for Leopardi, binary terms are always mutually exclusive, whereas Pavese seeks to reconcile opposites. As Catalfamo explains, “Senonché – qui sta la differenza – mentre in Leopardi i due termini si contrappongono e si escludono […] Pavese mira invece con ogni sforzo alla conciliazione degli opposti, cioè al superamento del mito in chiarezza, del bestiale nell’umano; e all’incontro del naturale a dell’umano con il divino; e questo sia in se stesso, come persona, sia nel pensiero e nella poetica” (Dialettica 5). We can, of course, debate whether Pavese ever achieved the desired transcendence, but it was undeniably his aim.

La luna e i falò is dense with tragedy: both the everyday tragedy of poverty and exploitation and the historical tragedy of the war. However, at his most optimistic, Pavese envisioned myth as a vehicle through which tragic fate might be transformed into liberty.84 Myth represents the core of the poet, the single theme or image to which he cannot help but return: “Di ogni scrittore si può dir mitica quell’immagine centrale, formalmente inconfondibile, cui la sua fantasia tende sempre a tornare a che più lo scalda” (Mestiere 257-58). It is the specter that haunts all poetic creation. And as that which symbolizes all of a person’s experiences, it necessarily contains historical and political valences, in addition to purely aesthetic or existential ones. If Nuto can be guided by both Communism and the mythic powers of the moon, then perhaps the two

84 “Noi siamo nel mondo per trasformare il destino in libertà (e la natura in causalità)” (Mestiere 388).
threads—one historically contingent, the other eternal; one political, the other poetic—
can be reconciled. Davide Lajolo concludes his biography of Pavese with the following
claim:

Quello che mi pare d’aver documentato con evidenza è che la sua dimensione mitica non hanno mai voluto né potuto essere un aristocratico distacco, ma la fiducia, che un colloquio con le masse, era possibile anche nel campo del mito e del simbolo. La sua strada tendeva al superamento del tradizionalismo classicheggiante e della ribellione romantica, dell’accademismo e del futurismo, in uno sforzo costante, anche se vano per lui, di riconciliazione tra gli slanci verso il mondo e il ripiegamento su se stesso. (382)

I would echo his sentiments, with the amendment that dialogue is not possible even in the realm of myths and symbols, but rather especially in that realm.
Chapter Two
Headless, Not Heartless: Bataillean Politics After Acéphale

“Je ne pense pas qu’un mythe puisse appauvrir l’existence. Je pense au contraire qu’une existence sans mythe est d’une pauvreté insoutenable.” —Georges Bataille, *Choix de Lettres*

“C’est ainsi que la mythologie s’introduit, dès l’abord, dans notre compréhension, comme la clé de voûte d’une science de la société peut-être avant même d’être un jeu d’images ensorcelantes donné en nourriture à notre inquiétude.” —Georges Bataille, “Ce que nous avons entrepris…”

There is a certain irony in selecting Georges Bataille, author of a text entitled “L’Absence de mythe,” as an exemplar of mythic sensibilities. Written for the occasion of the 1947 Surrealist exhibition (another irony, given Bataille’s longtime antipathy towards Surrealist leader André Breton), this brief text—less than a page long—underscores the dearth of myths in contemporary Western society. And yet, Bataille goes on to claim that we have made a myth of the absence of myth; that is, the notion of a liberal humanist subject, free from mythic, irrational prejudices and ruled by reason and productivity alone, is itself a myth. For even in 1947, Bataille remained invested in an idea he had first posited during the interwar period, namely that modern man is just as much in need of myth as his “primitive” ancestors, and that if the old myths have died out, it is our responsibility to create new ones. The question, then, is: what form should these new myths assume? If during the interwar period, Bataille proposed rather dramatic and visceral solutions to the problem—he sought, for example, to reinstate human sacrifice through his secret society, Acéphale—by the time Europe had plunged into a
second world war, he realized the impossibility of revitalizing modern man merely by
imitating the sacrifices and rituals of earlier, or non-Western, cultures. Consequently,
his pursuit of a modern mythic mentality turned inward, toward meditation and poetry,
rather than explosive violence in the streets. This is not to say that World War II
inaugurated a radical rupture in Bataille’s thinking; on the contrary, I argue (like Susan
Rubin Suleiman and Alexander Irwin, among others) that despite the superficial
contradictions separating his pre- and post-war writings, Bataille displays remarkable
continuity of thought on the subject of myth. If the forms assumed by myth (as well as its
necessary correlatives: sacrifice, the sacred, and transgression) varied over time, myth’s
fundamental tenets remained consistent through historical upheavals.

Of course, those commentators who locate a radical turning point in Bataille’s
work are rarely interested in his supposed equivocation on the subject of myth, instead
highlighting the changes in his political attitude. He was involved with numerous radical
political groups in the 1930s, including Boris Souvarine’s Cercle communiste
démocratique and Contre-Attaque, a political group of intellectuals under whose auspices
Bataille and the Surrealists enjoyed a brief truce. One of Bataille’s primary critiques of
Surrealism was that Breton had failed to translate aesthetic subversion into concrete
political action, and as such Contre-Attaque emphasized force, agitation, and violence.
Drawing on the work of Georges Sorel, Émile Durkheim, and (most troublingly for his
contemporaries) fascist leaders, Bataille sought to use Contre-Attaque to inspire
communal effervescence (and political efficacy) through explosive violence. If Breton

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85 The human sacrifice plan suffered from a number of logistical problems: most notably, none of the
members of Acéphale wanted to play executioner (though several, including Bataille, volunteered to be the
victim).
described the simplest Surrealist act as descending to the street and firing at random into a crowd, it was Bataille who took the sentiment to heart, frequently expressing frustration at the failure of the Communist party and other leftist groups to incite the same kind of ecstasy as the fascists—an ecstasy he would later link to sacrality.  

With the outbreak of World War II, however, when many of his contemporaries were joining the Resistance and finally translating their philosophical commitments into concrete political ones, Bataille began penning L’Expérience intérieure, the first volume of his Summa at theologica; from strikes, protests, and human sacrifice, he had progressed (or regressed, according to some critics) to mysticism, meditation, and solitude, all of which smacked of political indifference, especially given the magnitude of the violence wrought by the war. The first few sentences of Le Coupable, the second volume of the Summa at theologica, acknowledges the war, only to dismiss it out of hand: « La date à laquelle je commence d’écrire (5 septembre 1939) n’est pas une coïncidence. Je commence en raison des événements, mais ce n’est pas pour en parler. […] Je ne parlerai pas de guerre, mais d’expérience mystique » (OC V: 245). And this mystical experience involved, among other things, contemplating photographs of torture victims in order to attain the anguished ecstasy he deemed a precondition for communication. During the course of the war, Bataille split his time between Paris and the suburbs, leading a quiet (and at times tubercular) life; and while accusations of fascist collaboration are

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86 In the “Second manifeste du surréalisme” (1930), André Breton writes: “L’acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolvers aux poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu’on peut, dans la foule. Qui n’a pas eu, au moins une fois, envie d’en finir de la sorte avec le petit système d’avilissement et de crétinisation en vigueur a sa place toute marquée dans cette foule, ventre à hauteur de canon.”

87 Among Bataille’s colleagues in the College of Sociology, some served as soldiers (Michel Leiris, Patrick Waldberg); some were forced into exile (Roger Caillois, Georges Duthuit); some were arrested (Jean Paulhan, Jean Wahl); and some were shot for their Resistance activities (Lewitsky). Bataille is decidedly the odd man out.
unjustified, it is fair to say that his political activities were decidedly subdued in comparison both to his pre-war commitments and the commitments of many of his contemporaries (including Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom Bataille had a long-standing rivalry).

My goal, then, is twofold: first, to demonstrate that Bataille remained invested in the possibility of a contemporary mythology in the postwar era, and second (and more importantly) to show that this mythology had undeniable political consequences. In short, I maintain that Bataille’s devotion to myth, mysticism, and sacrality at a moment when such terms seemed at best tangential to prevailing political problems, and at worst a form of active collaboration with fascism, was in fact a clearly outlined political program, one in which subversive eroticism and useless sovereignty went hand-in-hand with revolutionary politics.

I will begin by outlining Bataille’s vision of myth, both before and after 1939, as well as myth’s interpenetration with concepts like sacrifice, the sacred, and community. I will then discuss Bataille’s political investments, distinguishing them from more popular commitments like Sartrean existentialism and Communism. Finally, through close readings of both his “philosophical” texts and his fiction, in particular his 1950 novel *L’Abbé C*, I will demonstrate that Bataille’s mythic thinking and activities were pregnant with political potential. Indeed, literature will ultimately play a key role in Bataille’s efforts to envisage a modern mythology, with fiction and poetry assuming the position once occupied by physical sacrifice.

It is difficult to parse Bataille’s feelings toward myth, given that he deployed the term to describe different phenomena (ethnographic inquiries, fascist propaganda, poetic
expression) and often used “myth” interchangeably with other words (ritual, poetry, sacrifice). Bataille has, at various moments, described myth as collective representation, provocation, fantasy, ritual, intimacy, immediacy, irrationality, taboo, transgression, and the overcoming of fear and disgust. While I will attempt to deconstruct these various features of myth, for the sake of clarity I will begin by establishing Bataille’s mythic sensibilities according to the definition of myth set forth in the introduction to this dissertation. What is most important to note is that Bataille did not advocate a myth (that is, a given narrative), but rather a mythic mentality, or mythic mode of existence. For Bataille, myth was not a discursive phenomenon, but rather a way of being.

**Ecstatic, Catastrophic, and Explosive Time**

Temporality is a central feature of such Bataillean concepts as inner experience, sovereignty, and unemployed negativity. What unites these terms (and what likewise links them to ethnographic notions of the sacred) is a concern for the present at the expense of the future. For Bataille, the problem with so-called rational man (and his counterpart, the capitalist) is that he subordinates present desires to future projects. Sovereign expenditure, a concept Bataille began to outline in his 1933 essay “La notion de dépense” and further developed in *La Part maudite* (1949), must, by definition, exist only for its own sake. It cannot be enacted in the name of exchange or some sort of gain, for:

> to exist in the service of some interest, to subordinate present life to an end or future goal, to judge actions according to their usefulness, consider the greater good or even think of consequences beyond the present moment…in short, *to work or employ one’s negativity* in any way is a betrayal of the humanity within us, is a ‘fragmentation’ of existence and the time of existence. Consequently, if
Bataille privileges chance occurrences such as laughter, eroticism, or tears, it is because they are confined to the ‘present moment.’ They are not involved in the calculations of productive activity. (Gemetchak 66)

The rejection of project is therefore motivated by temporal considerations, the desire to immerse oneself in a sort of eternal present. To achieve the ecstasy that Bataille believes fundamental to communication and community, we must enter a mythic, non-linear time—“time unhinged” [“le temps ‘sorti des gonds’”] (OC V: 89).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that entering “mythic time” is not equivalent to returning to some primordial past. Bataille knew as well as anyone that the practices and beliefs of the past were inaccessible to modern man. In fact, he showed little interest in the past, in history, believing us to be living after the end of history. His investment in the present is more akin to an experience outside of time; when we lose ourselves in immanence, he claims, we encounter the divine. Bataille tells us that, « l’expérience intérieure est le contraire de l’action. Rien de plus » (OC V: 59). In place of the profane time of work and history, Bataille offers a sacred temporality, which is in fact a non-temporality.

Of course, such presentness is not sustainable, a fact that Sartre was quick to point out:

« Car enfin M. Bataille écrit, il occupe un poste à la Bibliothèque nationale, il lit, il fait l’amour, il mange » (202). Nevertheless, immanence not only informs his definition of key notions such as sovereignty and the sacred; it also dictates the form of his fiction. Stuart Kendall has noted the “hallucinatory sense of time” that pervades Blue of Noon: “Churning in rumination, Blue of Noon plays with time, which is to say with history and

88 See Bataille’s correspondence with Alexandre Kojève in Choix de Lettres.
with genealogy as well, this last in both the direct sense of parent-child relations and in the larger Nietzschean sense of the genealogy of values.” (Georges Bataille 121) In the journal *Acéphale*, Bataille refers to time alternately as “object of ecstasy,” “catastrophe,” and “time-explosion.”\(^{89}\) Denis Hollier, in his introduction to the writings of the Collège de Sociologie, discusses the experiments with time that were so central to all of the College’s participants, experiments he loosely links to Walter Benjamin’s messianism (Benjamin being a sometimes visitor to the College). In one of the College’s lectures, Anatole Lewitzky defined shamanism (one of the many mystical fields the College investigated) as a rebellion of man subjected to the force of time. Bataille’s goal, then, was to resist servility to linear time in whatever way possible.

*Abandoning the Light*

« Tout le réel est sans valeur, toute valeur irréelle. »
—Bataille, OC III: 222

« La vie humaine est excédée de servir de tête et de raison à l’univers. Dans la mesure où elle devient cette tête et cette raison, dans la mesure où elle devient nécessaire à l’univers, elle accepte un servage. »
—Bataille, OC I: 445

\(^{89}\) « Surhomme et acéphale sont liés avec un éclat égal à la position du temps comme objet impératif et liberté explosive de la vie. Dans l’un et dans l’autre cas, le temps devient objet d’extase et il importe en second lieu qu’il apparaisse comme « retour éternel » dans la vision de Surlej ou comme « catastrophe » (*Sacrifices*) ou encore comme « temps-explosion » : il est alors aussi différent du temps des philosophes (ou même du temps heideggérien) que le christ des saintes érotiques l’est du Dieu des philosophes grecs. Le mouvement dirigé vers le temps entre d’un coup dans l’existence concrète alors que le mouvement vers Dieu s’en détournait pendant la première période. » (*Acéphale* 20)
Bataille’s objection to future-oriented projects likewise led him to reject rationality—rational humanism being inordinately concerned with future productivity. This did not, however, involve a full-scale embrace of irrationality. Despite his flirtation with Surrealism, for example, (and a more sustained defense of it in the postwar era), he demonstrated little interest in the unconscious. Though he was undeniably attracted to the violent effervescence of the crowd, such effervescence cannot be equated with irrationality. Instead, the key term which Bataille holds in opposition to reason is affect. Bataille’s position is closer to that of Lefebvre who, in *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, advocates moving outside of Western reason not to assert an opposite to reason, as in the writing of romantic philosophy and literature, but instead to define everyday lived experience by something other than that which is dictated by the strictures of reason. Kendall likewise underscores the fact that Bataille’s “mythological anthropology” embraced both rational and irrational forces (*Georges* 53). Bataille’s favored object of criticism throughout his career was not so much rationality as utilitarian thinking, or utilitarian reductionism. “Inner experience,” Kendall tells us, “is the opposite of (Hegelian) useful activity” (*Georges* 163). Faced with Hegel’s negativity—a useful negativity—Bataille proposes an unemployed negativity whose goal is expenditure without external justification. Ffrench frames this thinking as supra-rational, rather than irrational:

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90 According to Amy Hollywood, Bataille’s language “operates through emotion—rather than through (or perhaps better, in addition to) reason” (31-32).

91 Opposition to Hegel is a consistent theme throughout Bataille’s career. Rodolphe Gasché, for example, describes Bataille’s mythological anthropology as a systemic takedown of Hegel’s phenomenology. See *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmatology* (2012).
Bataille does not, as might be supposed, propose an irrationalism. His theory of the sacred is a science of the heterogeneous, a supra-rational critique of rationality. Bataille’s account of affectivity attempts a form of supplementation of materialist Marxism with the sociological account of collective exaltation and social ‘effervescence’ (a word favoured by Durkheim and which as we will see has a particular currency in Bataille’s writing of this period) engendered by the sacred. *(After 29)*

A devoted reader of Dostoevsky, “Bataille assimilated the wisdom of the underground man who realized the inhumanity of subjecting oneself to reason and mathematics, calculations and prosperity, and who asserted the positive value of letting pure caprice and whimsical desire command one’s actions, even if—no, precisely because—it goes against reason and common sense” (Gemenschak 64). For Bataille, humanist ideology and representational thinking (both linked to reason) are distorting and alienating. His decision to foreground non-rational forces is justified insofar as they represent an undeniable component of human experience. Whereas reason seeks to either assimilate or reject that which is heterogeneous, or radically other, Bataille’s vision of sovereignty necessitates the acceptance of all facets of human identity, even (and especially) those elements that are most grotesque or terrifying—that is, those that are irrational. In the end, it is the refusal of reason that brings us closest to the divine: « Dionysos est un dieu ivre, c’est le dieu dont l’essence divine est la folie. Mais, pour commencer, la folie elle-même est d’essence divine. *Divine, c’est-à-dire, ici, refusant la règle de la raison* » (OC X: 610, italics mine). Bataille (like Nietzsche before him, with whom Bataille closely identified) wrote in the shadow of this mad god, Dionysus, seeking a means to effectively communicate, and even provoke, this experience of divine madness. 

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92 Bataille devoted an entire issue of *Acéphale* to Dionysus.
Bataille showed little patience for the hyper-individualism that has characterized Western philosophy and politics since the Enlightenment. His ethnographic interest in “primitive” cultures and his keen study of Durkheim and Mauss stemmed not from a naïve nostalgia for seemingly simpler (and thus superior) societies, but rather a recognition of both the necessity for cohesive communities and the waning efficacy of such communities in the modern era; the Collège de Sociologie blamed the development of bourgeois individualism for the devirilization of man. The centrality of community in Bataille’s thought cannot be overstated; Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot have each devoted a book to the topic—*La Communauté désoeuvrée* and *La Communauté inavouable*, respectively—and numerous other monographs and articles have sought to parse Bataille’s writings on the creation and function of community.93

According to Bataille, the foundation of community is concomitant with the sacrifice of the self; through self-loss, self-forgetting, or self-sacrifice, whether in sex or

other social forms of unproductive expenditure, we achieve unity with others. This self-loss is paradoxically the path to understanding one’s identity. For self-loss, Bataille claims, is a wound whereby we achieve communication; communication binds the wounds of discontinuous beings, thereby creating continuity.94 « Un individu », he writes, « n’est entier que cessant de se distinguer des autres, ses semblables » (OC XI : 63).

It is necessary to note the methods of community building endorsed by Bataille. Contrary to common sociological understandings of community, whereby the community coheres around shared goals (e.g. work), Bataille’s community arises from unemployed negativity. It is a social bond not subject to recuperation, accumulation, or production—the “inoperative community” addressed by Nancy.95 Bataille’s efforts to revitalize the notion of community took several different forms: the explicit call for community in such groups as Acéphale and the Collège de Sociologie, groups that desired “contestatory creativity in the face of political disaster”; communities of excess motivated by transgression and expenditure (best exemplified by “primitive” cultures); and communities bound by eroticism and/or inner experience (Mitchell 2). This third stage in his thinking of community may initially appear contradictory: how can inner experience, which would seem to imply solitude, engender community? Yet we must not forget that the communication of inner experience is just as important as inner experience tout court.

94 “Community for Bataille is born of a crisis in communication, a rupture in communicability in which understanding can nevertheless be shared. Identity is discovered only in self-loss. In communication, as Bataille said, ‘beings are lost in a convulsion that binds them together. But they communicate only by losing a portion of themselves. Communication binds them only through wounds where their unity, their integrity disperses in fever’” (Kendall, Georges 150).
95 As Michèle Richman explains, “In his important study, Jean-Luc Nancy underscores how the Bataillian premise that all community is rendered possible by an expenditure or dépense, traditionally in the form of a sacrifice, breaks with the usual telos of community united through a work or collective goals. Whence Nancy’s title ‘La communauté désoeuvrée’” (“Sacred Group” 76).
It is by *sharing* anguished ecstasy that we achieve connectedness. Indeed, the moniker “inner experience” is misleading for:

inner experience is not what it seems to be: internal (inner, interior) to an experiential subject. Rather, it serves to undermines the classic opposition between inside and outside, subject and object, as there is no interior place into which the subject can retreat: ‘inner’ experience is ex-centric experience. Indeed, the *only* sense in which it can be referred to as ‘inner’ comes from the fact that it escapes assimilation by any external authority (language or knowledge) and does not refer to any goal or reality transcending the experience itself (God, state, salvation, or profit in any form). (Gemetchak 67)

In short, inner experience—the notion that is often cited as the turning point in Bataille’s thought—is not incompatible with the more explicitly communal nature of his prewar writings. If Bataille seems to change tack in the late 1930s and early 1940s, replacing the collective effervescence of the crowd with inner experience, the two experiences lead to the same result: “the transfiguration of individual subjectivity into a state of disindividuation,” and thus into a community (Allison 94). Both the delirium of the crowd and inner experience are motivated by an intense encounter with the sacred that generates connectedness. However, it is not merely in eroticism or torture that one can locate sacrality and community; myth also emerges as one of the most effective ways of creating community. For Bataille, myth is not intellectual or abstract, but rather becomes real “insofar as it produces effects, or affects, in those who believe in it, in their subjective attitudes” (ffrench, *After* 21). His search for modern myths was a search to revitalize elective communities through non-utilitarian means in an age of extreme individualism. And, as I will later explore in more detail, community (and therefore myth) are central to Bataille’s political project, the means by which hegemony is disrupted through radical heterogeneity.
Like Waves in the Sea

In his pursuit of communication, Bataille goes beyond merely privileging the collective over the individual; he ultimately advocates transgression of the boundaries separating self and other, outside and inside. Transgression, he argues, is the founding principle of existence, such that the borders between man and nature, subject and object, sacred and profane, are disrupted. In short, he aspires to totality through mythic fusion.

However, it is important not to mistake Bataille’s totalizing impulses for the totality of totalitarian ideology or other master narratives. Totality of the latter sort, when encountering a radically heterogeneous element, seeks to either appropriate or expel said element. Its movement is always in the direction of homogenization. Bataille, on the other hand, embraced the heterogeneous, so much so that he developed a “science” of heterology. Mythic fusion, therefore, is the antithesis of homogenization, for “fusion requires heterogeneity. Bataille’s conception of ‘fusion,’ then, is not the result of either an appropriation of the other or an expropriation of oneself into identity with the world but the introduction of something other at the core of the self” (Mitchell 11). Indeed, Bataille rejected the Aufhebung of Hegelian dialectics, instead fighting to maintain things in contradiction. In his discussion of the potentialities of the human spirit, for example, which range from the ascetic to the voluptuous, he states: “Je ne tente pas de les réduire

96 “Assimilation to sameness should not be mistaken for the sovereign moment of fusion so attractive to Bataille” (Mitchell 11).
97 “[W]hat he sometimes would call Heterology, sometimes scatology or even base materialism [was] a materialism based more on the abject than on the object. Matter there was defined less by its internal properties than by an absolute impropriety, its resistance to any appropriation or assimilation—even intellectual. The residue of discharges, matter is first of all an object of disgust. […] Heterology would be the theory of that which theory expels. In its battle with the angel of repugnance, in the depths of darkness, thought persistently faces the things that repel it. What unites men? The things that repel them. Society stands upon the things it cannot stand” (Hollier xix).
les unes aux autres, mais je m’efforce de saisir, au-delà de chaque possibilité négatrice de l’autre, une ultime possibilité de convergence » (OC X: 11). Myth, then, represents the totality that arises in communication—the totality that resists utility: “he is at pains to distinguish separation, utility and servitude from totality and from myth [and] moves towards the reactivation of myth as the image which will call the totality of existence into play” (ffrench, *After* 21).

The image that most effectively summarizes Bataille’s conception of fusion is that of water (also a favorite metaphor for Nietzsche): « car les rieurs deviennent ensemble comme les vagues de la mer, il n’existe plus entre eux de cloison tant que dure le rire, ils ne sont pas plus séparés que deux vagues » (OC V: 113). In order to achieve this fusion, this radical self-loss, Bataille initially prescribes visceral experiences: laughter, tears, sex, death, torture. Yet during World War II, he began to explore the possibility of engendering fusion through dramatization: that is, through poetry, tragedy, and myth.

**Creation, Destruction**

“*Guilty* begins with a poem, reads like a diary, and contains passages of dense intellectual reflection as well as commentary. […] Simply put, this book is all but hopelessly unpublishable. It may be unreadable.”
—Stuart Kendall, Introduction to *Guilty*

Bataille’s texts are notoriously difficult to categorize generically, a fact he unabashedly acknowledged; in his preface to *Haine de la poésie*, he states: « Sur la publication, en un même livre, de poésies et d’une contestation de poésie, du journal d’un
He culled from numerous genres, including fiction, poetry, autobiography, philosophical essay, and ethnographic treatise, among others, in his efforts to capture something of “total man.”

He is likewise quite overt about his influences, drawing on (and contesting) everyone from Nietzsche to Hegel, Sade to Camus. However, he rarely offers critical analysis of the sort we might expect from a philosopher commenting on a fellow traveler. *Sur Nietzsche*, for example, despite its title, could only be dubbed an “analysis” of Nietzsche in the broadest sense of the world; instead, Bataille seeks to become Nietzsche, transforming Nietzsche’s ideas into something new and uniquely Bataillean.

As he explains in the introduction:

> En ce livre écrit dans la bousculade je n’ai pas développé ce point de vue théoriquement. Je crois même qu’un effort de ce genre serait entaché de lourdeur. Nietzsche écrivit « avec son sang » : qui le critique ou mieux l’éprouve ne le peut que saignant à son tour. […] Qu’on n’en toute plus un instant : on n’a pas entendu un mot de l’œuvre de Nietzsche avant d’avoir vécu cette dissolution éclatante dans la totalité. (OC VI: 15, 22)

Kendall explains that, “Like the Greek tragedians, who rewrote myths familiar to their viewers, Bataille rewrites ideas in order to provoke an experience. He relies on and repeats the language of ‘authorities’ whose work he writes through, challenges and carries into unexpected territories, to unexpected uses and conclusions” (Georges 39). In his quest for communication (which, in Bataillean terminology, is closer to something like experience or affect than pure discourse), Bataille took as his inspiration a collection of authors that can only be described as heterogeneous—Christian mystics, sociologists, sociologists, sociologists,
Surrealists, economists. His corpus is at once “utterly obsessively coherent and utterly incoherent and disrupted” (Kendall, Georges 95).

His fiction is just as difficult to categorize; “Blue of Noon is in fact a collage of fragments assembled for rumination” (Kendall, Georges 121). And in order to acquire these fragments for reassembly, one must first break apart existing texts and thought. If we define *bricolage* as the fragmentation of existing entities in order to reassemble them in new (and unexpected) ways, then it is clear that this is the organizing principle for Bataille’s thought. When, in a text like *L’Expérience intérieure*, he prescribes self-laceration, it is not in order to destroy the subject *tout court*. His aim is rather to break the both the subject and object apart in order to form a new being that fails to recognize clear subject-object distinctions, instead advocating continuity: “The workings of death in the text of *Haine de la poésie* designate the place where the subject of the speech-act comes to die, to dissolve and be born again, or, more precisely, to lose himself in order to recompose himself differently, since loss is the enabling condition of symbolic enactment” (Lala 108). Writing for Bataille thus becomes a means of self-destruction whereby reader and writer are brought into closer proximity.

*Sacrifice, Sacrality, and Communication*

One of the reasons critics claim that Bataille lost interest in the myth-politics connection after 1939 is that, whereas he uses the word myth frequently and explicitly in his pre-war writings, the term mostly drops out in his later work. However, Bataille is

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99 For a more complete sense of Bataille’s intellectual trajectory, see Volume XII of his Complete Works, which includes a list of every book he checked out of the Bibliothèque nationale from 1922-1950.
notorious for terminological inconsistency, and though the word may be absent, the core
tenets that undergird his understanding and appreciation of myth persist in his discussions
of sacrifice, the sacred, and communication. As a result, Bataille’s reflections on the
latter three can reveal much about his thinking on the former.

Sacrifice could be deemed the most consistently vital term in Bataille’s thinking.
Though it is most famously associated with Acéphale, the secret society that
contemplated enacting a human sacrifice, it assumes an array of forms, both physical and
metaphysical.\footnote{“For Bataille, sacrifice describes a wide set of practices—from eroticism to festivals to writing—that challenge the modern modalities of being. As a political practice, sacrifice is a mediated form of self-demolition, which allows its practitioners to unravel violently the tapestry of the modern servile self” (Goldhammer 23).} For Bataille, sacrifice is the basis of the social bond, a unifying act that
creates or revitalizes communities through a shared identification with both victim and
executioner. In “primitive” societies, social revitalization was facilitated by proximity to
the sacred; as Kendall makes clear, “Sacrifice, as a religious practice, establishes a
connection between two separate spheres of experience, the homogeneous profane sphere
of everyday life and the heterogeneous sacred sphere of timeless and infinite value, the
realm of the gods” (Georges 99). Sacrifice is therefore a means of accessing the sacred
realm, of overcoming the limits of profane existence. Sacrifice opens the subject and
exposes him to loss, and this loss is the wound whereby communication between
discontinuous beings becomes possible. If we return to our initial definition of myth, it
becomes clear that sacrifice and myth are united through the shared goals of community
and communication.
In direct contradiction to other forms of sacrifice (e.g., Hegelian), Bataillean sacrifice is not for anything; it is not subordinated to a project, or enacted as an exchange. It is a sacrifice for nothing—a loss without gain. And yet, despite Bataille’s strict opposition to utility, sacrifice does possess “useful” political potential; as Goldhammer argues, “In order to overcome the modern institutions and ideas that reduce human beings to servile things, Bataille argued for the adoption of sacrificial practices whose invocation of the sacred would shatter the reifying fictions of modern life” (16). In its modern iteration, then, sacrifice is that which opposes totalization (whether fascistic or capitalistic) by operating beyond the twin realms of utility and servility.

It is important to note that sacrificial violence is by no means equivalent to the violence of war, and more specifically to fascist violence. It is not the destruction of the thing (be it man, animal, or object) that matters, but rather the destruction of the thingness of the thing (in properly Heideggerian terms); the point is to remove the sacrificial victim from the realm of everyday, profane reality—from the realm of work and utility—and thereby restore him to the world of unintelligible caprice. This does not necessarily require a literal death, as evidenced by the fact that Bataille eventually turned away from blood sacrifice and toward the dramatization of sacrifice. If the sacrificial victim could be symbolically stripped of his ties of subordination, the effect would be as powerful as that of a physical sacrifice. As Bataille explains:

La puissance qu’a la mort en général éclaire le sens du sacrifice, qui opère comme la mort, en ce qu’il restitue une valeur perdue par le moyen d’un abandon de cette valeur. Mais la mort ne lui est pas nécessairement liée et le sacrifice le plus solennel peut n’être pas sanglant. Sacrifier n’est pas tuer, mais abandonner et donner. La mise à mort n’est qu’une exposition d’un sens profond. Ce qui importe est de passer d’un ordre durable, où toute consomation des ressources est subordonnée à la nécessité de durer, à la violence d’une consommation
inconditionnelle ; ce qui importe est de sortir d’un monde de choses réelles, dont la réalité découle d’une opération à longue échéance et jamais dans l’instant – d’un monde qui crée et conserve (qui crée au profit d’une réalité durable). Le sacrifice est l’antithèse de la production, faite en vue de l’avenir, c’est la consommation qui n’a d’intérêt que pour l’instant même. (OC VII : 311)

In short, sacrifice means leaving the world of duration in favor of immanence—which is precisely what myth aims to do. Thus, though Bataille’s attachment to blood sacrifices waned after 1939, his belief in the general vitality of sacrifice as a path to communication and community did not. He merely retooled his views on form, shifting his attentions to symbolic or dramatic enactments of sacrifice. This is where myth acquires renewed importance, for myth emerges as the symbolic approximation of a literal sacrifice, just as closely tied to blood as the sacrifices of old: « Les mythes sont même plus que les foyers de cohésion des existences individuelles: ils sont ce pourquoi un homme peut donner ce qu’il a de plus précieux, son sang » (L’Apprenti sorcier 374). In its opposition to linear temporality, rationality, individuality, and discontinuity, a mythic way of being could, Bataille argued, prove as positively disruptive and rejuvenative as more ancient rituals.

The sacred, in both its Christian and ethnographic incarnations, is likewise a central tenet of Bataille’s thought. The College of Sociology was founded on the principle of sacred sociology: that is, not a sociology of the sacred, but a sociology “where the group itself embodied the sacred character it would also study” (ffrench, After 15). Unfortunately, defining the sacred is a tricky task; Bataille himself admits: « De ce mot, nous ne pouvons donner une définition justifiable » (OC X: 626). Perhaps its most central feature is its opposition to the profane; Denis Hollier refers to the sacred-profane distinction as “the basis for all aspects of the thinking of Bataille” (qtd. Guerlac 22). In Théorie de la religion, Bataille associates the sacred with continuity—that is, a lack of 105
distinction between subject and object—and the profane with discontinuity. In a similar
vein, he foregrounds the communal aspect of sacrality: the sacred is supra-individual; it
ruptures isolation; it is a convulsive form of communication comparable to love. It is
this feature of the sacred that brings it in closest proximity to sacrifice, for it is the
sacrality of sacrifice that unites communities in a mutual wounding and shared
identification with the victim: « Le sacré est justement la continuité de l’être révélé à
ceux qui fixent leur attention, dans un rite solennel, sur la mort d’un être discontinu »
(OC X: 27).

If the profane realm is one of work and utility, then the sacred is by definition
useless. The sacred is the realm of loss, beyond meaning and instrumentality. It is the
persistence of the natural order—the natural order being that which preceded work.
The sacred is almost always described in terms of affect and immanence (as opposed to
reason and futurity). It engenders an immediate, affective violence that Bataille
associated with crowd psychology and mass violence (at least in the prewar period): « Le
sacré est ce bouillonnement prodigue de la vie que, pour durer, l’ordre des choses
enchaîne et que l’enchaînement change en déchaînement, en d’autres termes en
violence » (OC VII: 312).

What, then, is the relationship between the sacred and myth? Though Bataille
favors the “immediate affectivity” of the sacred, it nonetheless “may be engaged or

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101 According to Kendall, “Bataille described the sacred as nothing but ‘a privileged moment of communal
unity, a moment of convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled.’ In the margin of his draft,
beside that line, he wrote ‘identical to love’” (Georges 145).
102 « Le monde sacré n’est, en un sens, que le monde naturel subsistant dans la mesure où il n’est pas
entièremen réductible à l’ordre instauré par le travail, c’est-à-dire à l’ordre profane » (OC X: 115).
103 “Crowd psychology is thus an incidence of the sacred, and the violent mass appears as the contemporary
equivalent of the archaic tribe in a state of collective exaltation” (ffrench, After 31).
conjured by means of a mythic representation” (ffrench, After 50). The sacred by nature defies representation, order, and discourse, yet myth emerges, if not as the sacred in discursive form, then as a sort of totem that possesses the power to provoke sacred experiences. Myths, then, are not merely stories but rather the symbolic repository for collective (and sacred) effervescence. Myth symbolically enacts sacrifice, eliciting communal, affective responses, which in turn allow us to access sacrality.

Bataille was famously resistant to discourse: it is not language, he claims, but affect that lies at the heart of communication. Suzanne Guerlac reminds us that “Bataille initially rejected language altogether for silence, the silence of a non-savoir (non-knowledge) which was not at all a philosophical concept nor primarily a poetic mood or language effect. It was an experience of emotional intensity” (17). His privileging of sacrifice over linguistic expression was due to the fact that “Sacrifice, performed within the context of sacred ritual, could bind the members of a community together more forcefully, Bataille believed, and more enduringly, than anything words could do because of its overwhelming affective shock” (Guerlac 17). Yet despite Bataille’s opposition to discourse, he maintained that communication held the key to community, and indeed to existence itself: « la communication est un fait qui ne se surajoute nullement à la réalité-humaine, mais la constitue » (OC V: 37). He defines communication broadly as the experience of being outside oneself and thereby connected with another. In the Summa atheologica, he likens communication to a kind of mutual laceration, a wounding whereby we are able to form attachments to others:

104 “Communication in Bataille’s sense of the word is rather the volatile experience of being ‘outside’ oneself, ‘beyond’ oneself in relation to another human being” (Gemerchak 68).
Dans la mesure où les êtres semblent parfaits, ils demeurent isolés, refermés sur eux-mêmes. Mais la blessure de l’inachèvement les ouvre. Par ce qu’on peut nommer inachèvement, animale nudité, blessure, les divers êtres séparés communiquent, prennent vie en se perdant dans la communication de l’un à l’autre. […] La communication demande un défaut, une « faille » ; elle entre, comme la mort, par un défaut de la cuirasse. Elle demande une coïncidence de deux déchirures, en moi-même, en autrui. (OC V: 263, 266)

Furthermore, any “philosophical revelation” remains meaningless unless communicated. In fact, his commitment to the principle of communication was such that he came out strongly against Jean Genet, an author with whom he shared countless aesthetic affinities, because of Genet’s alleged refusal to communicate: « L’œuvre de Genet, quoi qu’on puisse en dire qui en montre le sens n’est immédiatement ni sacrale ni poétique parce que l’auteur la refuse à la communication » (OC IX: 302). When Bataille spoke out against language and in favor of silence, discourse was frequently his true target—that is, language defined as utilitarian, rational, slavish. « On ne peut, discursivement, exprimer l’intimité » (OC VII : 311). His aim in L’Expérience intérieure was to explore alternatives to the conventions of written discourse. Though he desired communication, the words of the text are not in and of themselves that communication. Instead, he described meditative practices that, if properly enacted by the reader, would ideally lead to his laceration, a wounding through which he might communicate not with words, but with affect.105 Amy Hollywood explains that, “Bataille, following the tradition of Pascal, Nietzsche, and the Surrealists, offers an alternative, a language that operates through emotion—rather than through (or perhaps in addition to) reason” (31-32). Even if Bataille had wanted to disseminate a message, the nature of the experiences he sought to describe

105 See in particular his description of the photograph of a Chinese torture victim in L’Expérience intérieure. Meditative contemplation of the photograph provoked ecstasy in Bataille, an ecstasy he believed could approximate the state of mind of the victim.
defied such efforts. As Alexander Irwin reminds us, “A mystical method ‘cannot be communicated in writing’. But it can be embodied in and as the anguished substance of a human life: a life that produces itself (and enacts – repeatedly – its own violent end) as writing” (146).

What Bataille sought to communicate was an experience, affect beyond discourse, what Irwin dubs “literary sainthood”: “sacred figures transmit, not philosophical or political theses, but an attitude, a style of existence, an orientation that perhaps cannot be precisely verbalized, but whose emotional atmosphere the ‘addressee’ absorbs” (217). How, then, does this notion of communication relate to the aforementioned themes of sacrifice, the sacred, and most importantly myth? Though certain terminological convergences must be inferred, others are explicitly stated in Bataille’s texts, as when he equates sacrifice and communication in L’Expérience intérieure (though he specifies that sacrifice is communication through the heart, rather than the mind—“mouvement du cœur”) (OC V: 65). This view of communication is what led him to initially embrace those experiences and rituals (like human sacrifice and torture) most likely to elicit strong affective responses. However, as previously discussed, in the postwar period he began to consider a more capacious definition of communication that might include more “traditional” engagements with language. In the Summa atheologica and later works, inner experience and writing become the new means of symbolically approximating the sovereign experience generated by blood sacrifices of the past. And the particular form of writing to which Bataille was most drawn was poetry, which he defines as the modern-day equivalent of myth: « Mais la poésie n’est plus, de nos jours, une expression de mythes donnés avant elle, elle-même est le mythe […] qui nous rend au mouvement
éperdu et si volontiers déchaîné, que nous sommes » (OC XI: 274). By linking myth to poetry, he both resurrects the potential for a modern mythology, and rescues literature from wholesale dismissal as servile. For not all forms of poetry assume the status of myth—only those that enact a sovereign form of writing capable of lacerating readers to the point of tears or laughter.

**From Silence to Sovereignty: Poetry’s Transgression of Poetry**

“Il s’agit de faire entendre cette chanson de la sirène qu’est pour Bataille la littérature, chanson dans laquelle se composent la séduction et la terreur.”
—Ernst and Louette, *Georges Bataille, cinquante ans après*

“Mythic invention […] is not so different from artistic creation.”
—ffrench, *After Bataille*

The discrepancy between Bataille’s pre- and postwar thought, then, does not involve, as most critics have claimed, a loss of political fervor, but rather a shift in attitude regarding the political potential of literature. The College of Sociology, one of the principle vehicles for Bataille’s thought in the late 1930s, was fervently opposed to art and literature. In fact, Bataille’s criticisms of Surrealism and other so-called revolutionary groups centered on their over-investment in the creation of “works”; as Denis Hollier explains in his introduction to the writings of the College, “by exhibiting and publishing, the [Surrealist] movement renounced its revolutionary inspiration. They talked about changing existence but ended up signing paintings, books, and checks like ordinary artists” (ix). If for Hegel, the sacred emerges as art’s fourth dimension, the
College assumed the opposite position: “Restoration of the sacred begins by breaking with the world of art. The College is a negative cathedral” (Hollier xi). Roger Caillois, who, along with Bataille and Michel Leiris, helped to found the College, was particularly virulent in his critiques of the novel. In *Puissances du roman*, he describes the novel as an attack against society itself, a drain on the sacred that works against unity. For Caillois, resistance to fascism began with resistance to the novel. Literature was servile, the College claimed, and consequently any “revolutionary” movement that remained invested in literature was doomed to failure. Furthermore, since reading a novel is a solitary pleasure, it robs men of their collective potential. Bataille expanded on the connection between (failed) artistic movements and political ones, stating that democracy and the novel are linked through their devirilizing impulses: “The crimes of democracy therefore are no different from the crimes of the novel. Like the novel, democracy makes men lose their virile unity: democracy, by desocializing, ‘devirilizes’ them, (‘emasculates’ them, Bataille said). It spreads them apart, disseminates them, and dooms them to emptiness, interstices, and solitude” (Hollier xvi). Hollier has even suggested that Bataille’s decision to delay publication of his own novel, *Le Bleu du ciel*, for over twenty years is linked to his literary antipathy during the 1930s. Yet beginning with *L’Expérience intérieure* and continuing through the postwar writings, Bataille revealed a profound investment in poetry, treating sacrifice and poetry as equivalent terms insofar as both are safety valves for the release of excess energies. In fact, as early as “La notion de dépense” (1933), Bataille had suggested that, “Le terme de poésie […] peut être

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106 Excess energy being the central conceit of his “economic masterpiece,” *La Part maudite*. For more on this, see ffrench, *After Bataille*, p. 85.
As previously discussed, Bataille’s penchant for working in multiple genres, and for tearing apart and reassembling these genres in novel ways, makes it difficult to trace a clear trajectory of his feelings toward literary form. Nonetheless, given his tendency to describe poetry and myth as comparable genres, and given poetry and myth’s parallel imbrication with sacrifice, further exploration into his attitude toward poetry will help elucidate his investment in myth. Mythology and poetry may not be identical, but both are forms of the sacred and sacrifice; both seek to avoid servitude; both operate against discourse in the spirit of contestation. Though he recognizes the limitations of the analogy, he nonetheless locates in modern poetry the potential for inciting the same affective responses previously restricted to myth. If, with the outbreak of World War II, Bataille seemed to abandon those rituals and concepts most closely connected to myth (e.g. human sacrifice), these same rituals later reappear in forms more appropriate to the social and historical context in which Bataille was operating. Indeed, this transition from mythic ritual to poetry is clearly outlined in L’Érotisme, wherein Bataille describes literature as religion’s heir: « Le sacrifice est un roman, c’est un conte, illustré de manière sanglante » (OC X: 89).

107 In Michael Richardson’s introduction to The Absence of Myth, he explains: “Above all, Bataille considered poetry to be the only real residue of the communal sense of the sacred that had survived into the present-day society; thus it is that he makes the equation between it and sacrifice” (22).

108 « En particulier, les mythes, à certain égards analogues aux rêves, ne diffèrent pas entièrement des trouvailles poétiques récentes. Il est vrai qu’un poème moderne n’a nullement le sens d’un mythe, mais un mythe a parfois le même attrait qu’un poème moderne » (OC XI : 57). See also: Bataille, “Ce que nous avons entrepris…” in L’Apprenti sorcier, pp. 367-78.
Though the abruptness of Bataille’s transition from the pre- to postwar eras has perhaps been overstated, it is true that he recognized the inefficacy of his early efforts to recreate ancient forms of myth and sacrifice and sought alternative outlets for expenditure more appropriate to the modern world. And though he virulently rejected literature pressed into political service, he did not dismiss the possibility of poetry having social consequences; in the postwar years “the writing on poetry mediates the political concerns of the pre-war period” (ffrench, After 88). But how does Bataille envisage postwar French politics playing out in poetry and myth? How can artistic creations preserve the effervescence of myth without bowing to prescribed political aims?

Contemplation as Action

During the 1930s, Bataille wrote explicitly about the political consequences of myth. The Collège de Sociologie (1937-39) and, to a lesser extent, Acéphale (1936-39), were created with the express purpose of exploring the interpenetration of myth and politics. In a letter to Pierre Kaan, he insisted on the need to fight fire with fire—the need to employ fascist (i.e. mythological) techniques to combat fascism: « Je n’ai pas de doute quant au plan sur lequel nous devrions nous placer – cela ne peut être que celui du fascisme lui-même, c’est-à-dire le plan mythologique » (L’Apprenti sorcier 112). The key difference, of course, was that “Bataille’s project would put myth in the service of the community of individuals rather than in the service of their oppressive leaders, political, religious, economic or otherwise” (Kendall, Georges 107). The problem with formal political parties, and even with some “radical” groups, was that “the forum of the political party does not permit the expression of revolutionary effervescence and
necessarily leads to compromise at the level of ‘reality’. The political space of the party is
in effect exceeded by the affective force of the street, in other words by heterogeneous
affectivity or effervescence” (ffrench, After 48).

Disillusioned with the inefficacy of traditional political methods and seeking
alternative expressions of the subversive force of the sacred, Bataille began work on the
Summa theologiae in 1939. This is the moment often described by critics (taking their
cue from Sartre) as Bataille’s mystical turn. The term is not entirely inaccurate;
Bataille himself welcomed the moniker, freely admitting to the influence of such
Christian mystics as Angela of Foligno, Theresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross on
his own work. He was careful, however, to distinguish between his meaning of mysticism
and the meaning typically attributed to it: « J’entend par expérience intérieure ce que
d’habitude on nomme expérience mystique : les états d’extase, de ravissement, au moins
d’émotion méditée. Mais je songe moins à l’expérience confessionnelle, à laquelle on a
dû se tenir jusqu’ici, qu’à une expérience nue, libre d’attaches, même d’origine, à
quelque confession que ce soit. C’est pourquoi je n’aime pas le mot mystique » (OC V:
15). What attracted Bataille to mysticism was the notion of contemplation as action, of
inner ecstasy as a precondition of external political change. Whereas Sartre (along with
Caillois and others) saw politics and mysticism as fundamentally antithetical, Bataille
placed them in dialogue, such that communication engendered by the shared wounds of

109 To cite merely one example of his political frustrations, in April 1935 Bataille, Pierre Kaan, and Jean
Dautry sent a card to various friends and comrades which asked simply: “Que faire? Devant le fascisme,
etant donné l’insuffisance du communisme.”
111 “For Bataille, as for a central strand of the medieval Christian mystical tradition, contemplation is itself
a form of action, one that generates a community brought together through their shared contemplation of
the real (what Bataille in Guilty refers to as the catastrophe, which can be linked to contemporary
discussions of trauma)” (Hollywood 66).
meditation proved more politically potent than more conventional activism. As Hollywood explains, “Bataille understands mysticism not as a flight from history but as the apprehension of the other in his or her bodily specificity and particularity—a form of communication necessary before more goal-directed political projects can be usefully or meaningfully undertaken” (15). Irwin, emphasizing both the continuity between Bataille’s pre- and postwar thinking and the political potency of mysticism, writes:

“Viewed through the lens of Bataille’s shifting interpretations of sacrifice, mystical writing reveals itself not as a break with politics, but as a gesture that carries forward a certain form of political contestation entwined with the subversive force of the sacred” (30). The mysticism to which Bataille was attracted was radically heterogeneous, and as such was capable of subverting totalizing systems; it represented a non-political solution to a political problem.

However, the primary point of contention regarding Bataille’s politics is not simply that he seemed to abandon his former radicalism, but that he did so on the eve of World War II, at the very moment that concrete action mattered most. It is undeniable that Bataille rarely wrote about the war. Yet, as is the case with all Batailllean terminology, he created associative chains, such that his discussion of something like religion often contains insights into his ideas on politics and war. Quoting Kierkegaard in “La Conjugation sacrée,” Bataille insists: « Ce qui avait visage de politique et s’imaginait être politique, se démasquera un jour comme mouvement religieux » (OC I : 442).

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112 Irwin continues: “Bataille was convinced that the meditational method and more broadly the mystical style of existence he made available through his writings opened the route to a concrete experience of the heterogeneity and sovereignty of the self and thus laid the groundwork for genuine freedom. The inner experience of freedom remains the precondition of any meaningful deployment of freedom in the public, political world” (163).
Indeed, Bataille (like Caillois) saw war as a sort of natural heir to primitive religion:

“War and religion are historically among the most potent channels of expenditure, catalyzing violent ecstasies whose essence is a ‘loss of substance’” (Irwin 129). However, if war and religious sacrifice begin as comparable forms of expenditure, modern warfare diverges from its religious antecedent by submitting to principles of calculation and utility:

L’esprit méthodique de conquête est contraire à celui du sacrifice et dès l’abord les rois militaires se refusent au sacrifice. Le principe de l’ordre militaire est le détournement méthodique de la violence vers le dehors. Si la violence sévit à l’intérieur, il s’y oppose dans la mesure où il le peut. Et, la détournant vers le dehors, il la subordonne à une fin réelle. Il la subordonne ainsi généralement. Ainsi l’ordre militaire est-il contraire aux formes de combat spectaculaires, qui répondent davantage à une explosion effrénée de fureur qu’au calcul raisonné de l’efficacité. Il ne vise plus, comme le faisait dans la guerre et dans la fête un système social archaïque, à la plus grande dépense de forces. La dépense des forces subsiste, mais soumise au maximum à un principe de rendement : si les forces sont dépensées, c’est en vue de l’acquisition de forces plus grandes. [...] Il fait de la conquête une opération méthodique, en vue de l’agrandissement d’un empire. (OC VIII : 321-22)

Bataille concludes that the principal philosophical aim of the postwar era is the search for a form of expenditure other than war, an adequate means of channeling our collective energy that does not lead to utter annihilation: « il s’agit d’épuiser sans guerre cette accumulation sans précédent, qui a changé le monde entier en un colossal tonneau de poudre » (OC VIII: 454).

Of course, in the context of World War II, Bataille’s particular brand of politics would have been viewed with suspicion, if not downright hostility. In response to Francis Marmande’s efforts to rehabilitate Bataille as a political figure by claiming that “the resistance of Bataille's writing, his focus on the use of words rather than simply their meaning, is itself a form of antiauthoritarian and contestatory political engagement,”
Hollywood is justified in suggesting that Sartre and others would have viewed this as “an attenuated understanding of politics” (63). Sartre’s opinion, not only of Bataille but also of politics writ large, and of the relationship between literature and politics, dominated the postwar intellectual landscape. It was therefore difficult for Bataille’s contemporaries to take him seriously as a “political writer” given the tenuous connections between his meditative methods and concrete responses to the war. Yet the generation that came after, in particular the writers associated with Tel Quel (Foucault, Barthes, Sollers, and Kristeva, among others) made immense strides toward locating the political potential in Bataille’s work, ultimately using him as the fulcrum by which to finally surmount the obstacle of Sartrean hegemony.¹¹³

In place of littérature engagée, which Bataille believed made literature a slave to political goals, Bataille proposes an excessive and violent form of art that could have political consequences, but only insofar as the excess is enacted for its own sake. For examples of such an art, he points to painters like André Masson and Picasso; in a 1945 essay written for a collection on “L’Espagne libre,” Bataille develops the argument that Picasso is not an inherently political painter, but that “the bombing of Guernica provides him with an event that allows him to give a ‘precise political sense’ to the violence and excess which his painting already expresses” (ffrench, “Donner” 127-28). Likewise, in a 1946 essay on André Masson, Bataille seeks to redefine engagement: « Mais si l’on parle d’engagement, nous pouvons l’entendre en deux sens. Être engagé peut vouloir dire : servir une activité définie, une révolution, une guerre, une réforme politique, un effort de production agricole ou industrielle. Mais ce qui m’engage aussi bien, peut être une

¹¹³ For more on the post-structuralist appropriation of Bataille, see Suzanne Guerlac’s Literary Polemics.
totalité. […] Chaque œuvre d’André Masson est une totalité » (OC XI: 36). The Bataillean totality, as previously mentioned, is not totalizing or totalitarian, but rather seeks to acknowledge (without appropriating or expelling) the radical heterogeneity of existence, maintaining a space for the most anguished and grotesque aspects of human life. If myth is a totality, as is engagement, then it stands to reason that the two realms intersect.

**Diverting the Powder Keg**

Bataille may not have met Sartre’s standards for engagement, but it is impossible to deny the political resonances of his postwar writings—most notably *La Part maudite*. As Shannon Winnubst remarks:

> Written across that intense period of European history that witnessed the close of the Second World War and the emergence of the Cold War, these three volumes attempt to think against the trend of historical thought that would render capitalism or communism the only two alternatives to fascism. Michael Surya describes this as a period of intense production and seriousness for Bataille, a period in which politics in its broadest sense took hold of his writing, leaving the Dada and surrealist scandals from the 1930s ‘a distant and disparate echo.’ (3)

Bataille himself explains that one intent of *La Part maudite* was to “trancher les problèmes politiques” (OC VII: 23). It is in this text that we are treated to the clearest articulation of the intersection of mysticism with Bataille’s vision of economics and politics. The three volumes of *La Part maudite* roughly address economics, eroticism, and sovereignty, respectively, thus demonstrating the inherent affinity of these three seemingly disparate domains. What unites them is transgression—by violating the precepts of economic (i.e. capitalist) utility, reproductive sexuality, and Hegelian mastery, we encounter a revitalized sacrality largely lost to modern man. This sacrality
has distinctly political resonances: “The theory of the sacred develops as a theory of political violence; it also informs a pragmatics of political intervention” (ffrench, *After 24*). And as we shall see, the characteristics of transgression intersect at numerous points with those of myth.

I will not attempt a detailed summary of the economic “theory” promulgated in *La Part maudite*. Suffice it to say that its basis is excess; taking as his starting point the fact that all living things produce more energy than they require for mere survival, and that they must therefore decide how to channel the remainder, Bataille advocates “wasteful” spending in the form of festivals or conspicuous consumption, rather than reinvesting the excess in order to accumulate more profit (as in the capitalist model). In fact, both capitalism and communism are on the receiving end of Bataille’s critiques: “Bataille ultimately sees little difference between capitalism and communism. Both systems subordinate the lives of workers to the need for production, and both subordinate production not to the senseless expenditure that characterized the aristocratic sovereigns of the past but to the ‘responsible’ accumulation of wealth” (Kendall, “Horror” 54). By transgressing the “sacred” law of profits, Bataille believes we can rediscover communication, community, and true sacrality.

Thus emerges the main issue to which Bataille continuously returns: the reinterpretation of the instant of dépense as the basis for an alternative ethic. Whether it surfaces in discussions of artistic activity or is perceived in the political flirtation with nuclear disaster that marks politics in the atomic age, the characterization of unlimited expenditure remains constant. (Richman, “Bataille Moralist” 146)

It is by uniting wildly disparate fields through the shared motor of dépense that Bataille is able to imbue seemingly apolitical acts (eroticism, poetry, myth) with potent political
potential. To this end, he followed the economic lessons of *La Part maudite* with a full-length study of eroticism—including its political potential.

**The Community of Lovers**

Eroticism is one of the most pervasive themes in Bataille’s *oeuvre*; his earliest published works were pornographic tales (*Histoire de l’œil, L’Anus solaire*); in addition to *L’Histoire de l’érotisme*, the second volume of *La Part maudite*, he penned *L’Érotisme* (1957) and *Les Larmes d’Éros* (1961) as a continuation of his theorization of the community of lovers. Eroticism is one of several experiences (others include laughter, tears, and anguish) that bring us into proximity with death; in short, eroticism is assenting to life to the point of death. It is a wound by which we communicate with the other, an experience of mutual anguish that allows us to peer into the void that is death without expiring ourselves. It brings us from discontinuity into continuity: « Ce qui est en jeu dans l’érotisme est toujours une dissolution des formes constituées. Je le répète : de ces formes de vie sociale, régulière, qui fondent l’ordre discontinu des individualités définies que nous sommes » (OC X: 24). And, crucial to this discussion, the “breaking down of established patterns” has far-reaching political consequences. Indeed, Bataille insists that, “Le monde des amants n’est pas moins vrai que celui de la politique. Il absorbe même la totalité de l’existence, ce que la politique ne peut pas faire” (OC I: 532). The marriage of eroticism and politics is perhaps most apparent in his 1935 novel *Le Bleu du ciel*, as I

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will argue later in this chapter, the interpenetration of these two seemingly incompatible domains reappears in the 1950 novel L’Abbé C., wherein Bataille expands upon the consequences of excessive eroticism by pairing it with strategically useless betrayal.

When La Part maudite was published in 1949, the cover announced the title of the forthcoming second volume as De l’angoisse sexuelle au malheur d’Hiroshima. Though the title eventually granted to the work was merely L’Histoire de l’érotisme, Hiroshima’s position in the title indicates the explosive convergence of eroticism and politics, and more specifically the politics of the recent war, in Bataille’s thought. As Kendall explains:

Thus while the History of Eroticism had long been among Bataille’s concerns, it was also very much a product of its era, of the Second World War, Hiroshima, Auschwitz and the atomic politics of the Cold War. In extension of this thought, Bataille reviewed John Hershey’s accounts of Hiroshima and its aftermath, as well as a number of books on the Nazi concentration and death camps, racism, the excesses of Stalinism and war in general. Bataille, in short, praised eroticism as acceding to life even to the point of death against the horizon of man-made mass death and the potential extinction of the human race in nuclear holocaust.

Eroticism, for him, offered a form of consumption that was opposed to the bourgeois accumulation of wealth and to the wars that have historically proven the only outlet for that wealth. (Georges 191)

If large-scale social unity could no longer be attained through shared myths and rituals, then eroticism could at least create a community of two that would produce the same useless yet effervescent effects on a smaller scale. Like myth, eroticism rejects rationality (associated instead with reproductive sexuality) and favors the community (however small) over the individual. Like myth, it leads to fusion, creating wounds that facilitate communication. Excessive eroticism is precisely the sort of behavior that Bataille’s mystical, sovereign writing is meant to provoke and that his later writings would seek to symbolically enact through language.
Sovereignty

The third installment in *La Part maudite* trilogy remained unfinished during Bataille’s life, and was posthumously published in a fragmentary form. It is here that Bataille engages in his most sustained discussion of communism, the Cold War, and the possibility (or lack thereof) for revolution in postwar Europe. As previously mentioned, Bataille believed communism to be just as complicit as capitalism in the enslavement of man to future-oriented projects. During the 1930s, he had sought an effective means of combating the contagious effervescence of fascism. Two decades later, he at last arrived at that means (opposed now not only to fascism but to all major political orientations): sovereignty became the talisman of renewed sacrality, a form of power rooted in powerlessness. As Irwin explains, “The basis of effective resistance to political tyranny was not a theory or a political doctrine, but an experience of radical sovereignty, an experience of the self as sacred” (161). Bataille defines sovereignty as an experience of the miraculous—the miraculous being that which is impossible, yet there all the same. It is freedom from anticipation—being fully present in the moment rather than sacrificing present desires to future concerns (which, of course, is what myth also strives to do). It is delivery from servitude. The sovereign « échappe en un sens à la mort, en ceci qu’il vit dans l’instant. […] Le souverain est celui qui est, comme si la mort n’était pas » (OC VIII: 267, 270). Bataille provides an extensive, though not exhaustive, list of sovereign “effusions” (that is, expressions of sovereignty, or experiences that allow us to channel sovereignty); the list includes all the heavy hitters from Bataille’s arsenal, including laughter, tears, eroticism, ecstasy, the sacred, and sacrifice. To these he adds tragedy, comedy, play, anger, dance, music, combat, funereal horror, the magic of childhood, the
divine, the diabolical, beauty (and its opposite), crime, cruelty, fear, and disgust. If these terms appear frustratingly vague, this is due in part to the general nature of Bataille’s investigation (for which he apologizes on multiple occasions), and in part to the difficulty of speaking the sovereign (sovereignty being by definition that which exceeds language and knowledge). Sovereignty, Bataille tells us repeatedly, is nothing. It can only be experienced, not subjugated to discourse, though art and the imagination may allow us some insight: « Je désigne à présent l’ouverture de l’art, qui ment toujours mais sans tromper ceux qu’il séduit. […] Dans le monde de la souveraineté déchue, l’imagination est seule à disposer de moments souverains » (OC VIII: 300). It is perhaps this realization that sovereignty could no longer be accessed directly, as in ancient times, but only approached through the imagination that led him to reconsider the potential of mythic, or sovereign, writing.

Following a general methodological introduction, parts II and III of Sovereignty are devoted to an in-depth investigation of the relationship between sovereignty and communism. For Bataille, sovereignty is rarely connected to the notion of sovereign states or contemporary political leaders (which explains his lack of interest in politics as conventionally understood). Rather, he defines sovereignty as man’s primordial condition, a condition that, though in decline, continues to be available to those willing to throw off the shackles of utilitarianism. And myth, as a sort of dramatization of sacrifice and sacrality, facilitates this unshackling by reigniting the ecstasies once characteristic of religion and war—though in a less destructive form.
Transgression

Transgression, as the common element uniting the three volumes, plays two conflicting yet essential roles: it “not only disrupts the social order but also serves to sustain and strengthen it” (Mitchell 4). And in fact, the latter feature is more central to Bataille’s thinking: “transgression serves to constitute society as such” (Allison 92). Given the importance of community to Bataille’s thinking, transgression’s social value cannot be ignored. Bataille claimed that « le monde sacré s’ouvre à des transgressions limitées. C’est le monde de la fête, des souvenirs et des dieux » (OC X: 70). Thus, returning sacrality to the modern context would require transgression.

Bataille argues that the violation of rules and interdictions heightens the awareness of their necessity. Such collective ritualization of experience beyond the boundaries of the quotidian, including festivals of destruction whose modern avatar is warfare, provide access to the heterogeneous domain of the sacred Bataille subsumed under the experience of sovereign expenditure. Never is the cycle rejected for inducing a mechanistic repetition. Rather, it offers possibilities that would otherwise remain closed to private experience or states of consciousness. (Richman, “Bataille Moralist” 160)

By extension, then, myth, which is built on the principle of contestation and transgression, offers possibilities that would otherwise remain closed to private experience. Or rather, myth is one form assumed by such possibilities.

If transgression occupied a central position in Bataille’s thinking throughout his career, the forms that transgression adopted were subject to change. What mattered was a representation’s ability to provoke emotion, to “be” sovereignly, something to which myths—or certain kinds of myths, myths of immediacy—were particularly well-suited. In fact, he insists that, without myth, existence is unbearably empty—“une blessure ouverte” (Choix de lettres 132). The value of myth for Bataille is thus incontrovertible. What
remains is to demonstrate the precise political repercussions of an existence founded on the useless imminence and sovereignty of myth.

Just as myth rejects future-oriented projects in favor of pure immanence—uselessness—so too does Bataille insist that transgression can never be committed for something. It is always for its own sake. It is an act outside of project and utility. If the Surrealists favored transgression for its ability to provoke scandal, Bataille showed little patience for “those rituals of cultural aggression that were intended to test the limits of avant-garde tolerance” (Hollier xix). Uselessness, then, becomes (paradoxically) the linchpin of Bataille’s political “action,” insofar as “Powerlessness, or rather a certain performative renunciation of power, possesses paradoxical political efficacy” (Irwin 28).

Inutility remains a consistent theme across La Part maudite: useless economic expenditure; useless (i.e. non-reproductive) erotic adventures; and useless living (i.e. indifference to survival and attraction to death). And it is this uselessness, as enacted by transgression, that leads to sovereignty: « Jamais rien de souverain ne devait s’asservir à l’utile » (OC VIII: 273). Thus, having hit upon the “non-political” solutions to political problems that still evaded him in the 1930s, Bataille could now return to the question of literature—not littérature engagée, which was irrevocably tainted by servility, but a sovereign literature capable of occupying the position once held by myth and ritual.

115 « La souveraineté est le pouvoir de s’élever, dans l’indifférence à la mort, au-dessus des lois qui assurent le maintien de la vie. […] Le principe de la morale classique se lie à la durée de l’être. Celui de la souveraineté (ou de la sainteté) à l’être dont la beauté est faite d’indifférence à la durée, même d’attrait pour la mort » (OC IX: 296).
The Priest, the Libertine, and the Resistant

“And the pen is my terror, the pencil my shame…”
—William Blake

In the wake of his “economic masterpiece,” Bataille, defying all expectations, returned to fiction, publishing his novel *L’Abbé C* in 1950. The text follows twin brothers Charles, a self-professed libertine, and Robert, a parish priest, as Charles attempts to draw Robert into a life of erotic excess, only to discover that Robert has been masking a corrupt nature all along. At first glance, the novel features many of the same themes as Bataille’s earlier writings, both fictional and non-fictional: sadistic eroticism; condemnation of utilitarian action; mockery of devotion to external causes like the Church or politics. Yet, for a writer who rarely spoke explicitly about World War II, the novel is unique in that he includes a brief yet vital discussion of the Resistance. *L’Abbé C*’s narrative is primarily focalized through the lenses of eroticism and religion—those twin obsessions that followed Bataille throughout his career—yet a residual investment in politics rears its head in the form of Robert’s Resistance activities and eventual death at the hands of Nazi torturers. References to his political activities are few and far between, and Bataille does not seem to accord them any particular importance. The word “Résistance” first appears about thirty pages in, when Charles is describing Robert’s

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116 Though I don’t engage in a sustained analysis of the title here, Jean-Louis Cornille describes it as “un peu ridicule sous sa forme potachique de calembour facile.” Nevertheless, he ultimately insists on the title’s importance, writing, “Un ABC, c’est non seulement l’alphabet ou l’abécédaire de nos débuts scolaires ; c’est aussi un petit livre dans lequel sont énoncés fondements et principes. Denis Hollier insistait déjà sur l’importance de l’alphabet, de l’abc chez Bataille : en particulier de la lettre A – qui, dit-il, s’entend deux fois dans le nom de Bataille” (35). From 1929-1930, Bataille, along with Michel Leiris, Robert Desnos, and other contributors to the journal *Documents*, penned entries for a *Dictionnaire critique*, a sort of mock dictionary that resembled an alphabet book (A is for Abattoir, O is for Œil, etc.).
“transformation” following his encounter with Eponine, the prostitute who desperately desires Robert, in a church tower. Most of the passage refers to his depression in the wake of Eponine’s debauchery and excessive flirtation, with some of his parishioners believing him to be going mad. Suddenly, the narrator adds: “A cela s’ajoutait l’appui de la Résistance, dont il acceptait sans mot dire, et peut-être, en un sens, indifférent, les missions les plus imprudentes” (OC III: 265). The modifier “indifférent” is key in this passage; Robert does not help the Resistance out of some sense of loyalty or patriotism or religious righteousness. It is merely one form of expenditure among many, as becomes clear at the end of the novel, when we finally learn details of Robert’s actions following his capture and torture.

Save for this passing allusion to the war, there is almost no discussion of anything that could pass as “political” until Robert’s arrest, and even then, it is the erotic actions immediately preceding his arrest that dominate the narrative.¹¹⁷ The questions of erotic excess, hypocrisy, and betrayal take precedence over any political investments. Yet to write a novel so soon after the war in which the principal character expires at the hands of fascist interrogators is an undeniably provocative act—so provocative, in fact, that Bataille was accused of slander by a former résistant who believed the character of Robert to be based on a real-life personage. Robert is obviously far from the quintessential Resistance hero; his motives for joining are never explicitly addressed, and though he does not give up the names of the other members of his cell, this is not due to feelings of loyalty or political fervor. He withholds the names of the true Resistance

¹¹⁷ Shortly before his arrest, Robert runs away with two prostitutes and spends several weeks drinking and making love to them in a hotel
members, but he does give up his twin brother, Charles, and Eponine, Robert’s would-be lover, though neither has any connection to the Resistance. One of Robert’s cellmates visits Charles near the end of the novel to relate Robert’s bizarre final words, wherein he justifies surrendering the names of Charles and Eponine as a purer form of betrayal than simply giving in to torture.

This final confession is essential to understanding Robert’s actions throughout the novel—his counterfeit life as a priest, his behavior toward Eponine, his complex relationship with Charles—and is therefore worth quoting at length:

Robert lui dit agressivement : « Je n’ai pas voulu résister, je ne l’ai pas voulu et ne croyez pas que j’ai résisté, la preuve en est : j’ai donné mon frère et ma maîtresse ! » Mon visiteur, si gêné qu’il fût, voulut savoir s’il aimait ou s’il haïssait ceux qu’il venait de donner ainsi. Charles eut à ce moment quelque peine à reprendre : Robert répondit qu’il avait donné justement les êtres qu’il aimait le plus. Son interlocuteur imaginait que la torture venait de le rendre fou, mais Robert n’était pas fou : il avait même alors la plus grande lucidité. Et comme il portait les marques d’un long supplice, mon visiteur lui demanda : « En ce cas, pourquoi vous ont-ils torturé ? » Tout d’abord, ses bourreaux n’avaient pas voulu croire, ils avaient demandé d’autres noms. Il est certain que finalement, il se laissa torturer et ne parla plus : il ne donna pas les noms de ceux dont il avait réellement partagé l’activité clandestine. De guerre lasse, les policiers se contentèrent des premières dénonciations, auxquelles la longue torture qu’il subit ensuite sans parler donnait un caractère de vérité… (OC III : 363)

One page later, he reiterates the connection between betrayal and love: « Finalement, si j’ai refusé de donner les noms des résistants, c’est que je ne les aimais pas, ou les aimais loyalement, comme il faut aimer ses camarades. […] il m’était facile d’endurer s’il s’agissait d’hommes auxquels je suis étranger ! Tandis que j’ai joué de trahir ceux que j’aime » (OC III : 365).

How are we to understand this claim? Is Robert merely being provocative, or is there a more coherent political or philosophical program undergirding his actions? As a first step
toward answering this question, we can characterize Robert’s betrayal as a sort of wound: he wounds his brother and Eponine by falsely (and dangerously) accusing them of Resistance activities, and he wounds himself in the process by betraying those he loves most. And of course, Bataille had long maintained that shared wounds are the means by which communication and communities emerge. Secondly, the fact that his betrayal is useless means that it operates outside of the logic of dominant social and political systems; the irrationality of the betrayal therefore subverts hegemonic power. The function of myth and ritual in primitive societies was to interrupt the profane realm of work and utility, paradoxically revitalizing the community through its privileging of present desires at the expense of future concerns. If it is true that “transgression serves to constitute society as such,” then Robert’s transgression could serve a rejuvenative purpose (Allison 92). Mythic interruption is what allows the community to renew its contact with the sacred—which is Robert’s goal all along. Sacrality in the novel is located not in the Church or the Resistance; even Charles’s libertinism falls short. It is only with Robert’s final, useless betrayal that divinity is introduced into the work. For, as Robert himself explains, « Seule la trahison a l’excessive beauté de la mort. Je voudrais adorer une femme – et qu’elle m’appartînt – afin de trouver dans sa trahison son excessive divinité » (OC III : 347). According to Robert’s logic, treachery—or, in more immediately recognizable Bataillean terms, transgression—is thus an expression of divinity, of sacrality.

The notion that abhorrent objects or behaviors, including betrayal, could be sacred is by no means new; Durkheim discussed the idea at length in his exploration of the “left sacred.” According to Durkheim, the word “sacred” simultaneously designates that which
is pure, beneficent, healthy (the right sacred) and that which is impure and evil, engendering sacrilege, disease, and death (the left sacred). Even in common parlance, the French sacré contains both of these seemingly contradictory meanings.\textsuperscript{118} Robert’s betrayal, like many of Bataille’s favored heterological objects (feces, urine, blood, corpses, etc.) belongs unquestionably to the left sacred. Thus, his actions are not evil in the traditionally understood sense of the word, but rather reflect a restorative evil. If we think of \textit{L’Abbé C.} as continuing the work begun in \textit{Le Bleu du ciel}—the work of exploring the political consequences of eroticism and inutility—then Robert’s betrayal would play a similar role as Troppmann’s necrophilia.\textsuperscript{119}

By committing a perfectly useless form of betrayal, Robert evades the servility of evil done in the name of some gain (the kind of calculated evil Bataille associated with fascism), instead discovering a purer evil that exists for its own sake, the mal of Bataille’s 1957 volume \textit{La Littérature et le mal}. But it is not enough to simply transgress; a transgression enacted in solitude fails to attain sovereignty. It is only in communicating transgression that transformative action becomes possible. This is a central conceit of the novel. The significance of communication is conveyed in Charles’ need to publish his brother’s story (and his fears that he has failed to do the tale justice—hence the necessity

\textsuperscript{118} For example: \textit{la musique sacrée}, holy or sacred music, versus \textit{un sacré menteur}, a damned or accursed liar.

\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Le Bleu du ciel} famously ends with the protagonist, Troppmann, a self-professed necrophiliac, making love in a cemetery while Hitler Youth members march past. In Irwin’s analysis, “Necrophilia may be the only force that can restore political life. \textit{Le Bleu du ciel} hints ironically that if in 1934-35 any route to political revitalization still lies open, that route will pass through the necrophilic focus on death and expenditure. The revolutionary affirmation of life must recognize itself as entangled with the fascination of sacrificial death in an impure mixture outside of which all political commitment is illusory. Such a claim has – as one suspects – significant implications for the nature of political engagement and for the relationship between politics and literature.” (87) This evaluation holds true for \textit{L’Abbé C}, only now it is betrayal that brings us near to death and expenditure on the path to political revitalization.
of hiring an editor); Robert’s determination to write down his thoughts in his final days, and to reveal to his cellmate his reasons for betraying his brother; and the editor’s decision to spend four years crafting his introduction as part of a psychoanalytic treatment.

The question of how to best articulate experiences like sovereignty and transgression haunted Bataille throughout his career. And yet, he remained adamant that communication was essential, no matter how impossible that communication may prove. The question of communication’s form is therefore key, as evidenced by Bataille’s inclusion in the novel of numerous metatextual discussions of the uses and forms of literature. We see, for example, Charles’ anxiety regarding his “thinly-drawn characters”; his fear that the book is not convincing (it is for this reason that he secures the editorial aid of his financially-troubled friend); his reflections on the incongruity of memory and language; and his declaration that the rules of literature render it either ridiculous or false.

*L’Abbé C* is also marked by the same generic heterogeneity present in Bataille’s non-fictional writing: journal entries mixed with poetry; sober philosophical reflections interrupted by manic exclamations; at least three alternating narrators. This collage effect can be attributed to Bataille’s efforts to work around language’s inability to successfully render sovereignty and sacrality. Having long attested to the impossibility of poetry (to such an extent that *Haine de la poésie* was rebranded *L’Impossible* in the 1962 edition), in *L’Abbé C* he finally settles on a suitable analogy to express the impossibility of literature:

Mon absurdité imagina, dans ma défaillance, un moyen de formuler exactement la difficulté que trouve la littérature. J’en imaginai l’objet, le bonheur parfait, comme une voiture qui foncerait sur la route. Je longerais d’abord cette voiture
sur la gauche, à une vitesse de bolide, dans l’espérance de la doubler. Elle foncera alors davantage et m’échapperait peu à peu, s’arrêtant à mona de toute la force de son moteur. Précisément ce temps même où elle s’arracherait, me révélant mon impuissance à la doubler, puis à la suivre, est l’image de l’objet que poursuit l’écrivain : cet objet n’est le sien qu’à la condition, non d’être saisi, mais, à l’extrémité de l’effort, d’échapper aux termes d’une impossible tension. (OC III: 275)

It is not merely that the object of literature—be it sovereignty, mythic sacrality, or some other entity—can never truly be grasped; it is that such objects should not be grasped, and would in fact be tainted by possession. This is how Bataille finally works through the objections that had, for a time, prevented him from publishing literature and led him to pursue silence instead: though “true” representation is inaccessible, the “impossible tension” created during the pursuit of representation is capable of eliciting affective responses in the reader that may in turn lead to an encounter with the sacred. Writing can only be sovereign—can only avoid the servility of littérature engagée—by allowing its object to retain a certain sacred inaccessibility. Just as Bataille advocated assenting to life to the point of death (but without actually dying), so too must the writer come as close as possible to naming something without ever succeeding.120

Charles describes this process of approaching, but not attaining, the impossible summit as a simultaneous affirmation and negation, or a simultaneous writing and erasure:

Le seul moyen de racheter la faute d’écrire est d’anéantir ce qui est écrit. Mais cela ne peut être fait que par l’auteur ; la destruction laissant l’essentiel intact, je puis, néanmoins, à l’affirmation lier si étroitement la négation que ma plume

120 As Amy Hollywood explains, “he recognizes that communication cannot be grounded in literal sacrifice, for death makes communication impossible” (58). Bataille began to explore this idea in Sur Nietzsche, the third installment in his Summa theologica, this time using the analogy of the summit: « Comme la château de Kafka, le sommet n’est à la fin que l’inaccessible. Il se dérobe à nous, du moins dans la mesure où nous ne cessons pas d’être hommes : de parler » (OC VI : 57).
This self-annihilating writing is the closest Bataille could come to a modern approximation of the effects created by ancient myths and rituals (hence the claim that this writing accomplished “ce que généralement opère le temps”). Literature “paré de l’indifférence des ruines” is literature marked by the ecstasy that emerges when man is in the presence of death, the ecstasy formerly produced by blood sacrifices. But what does this self-annihilating writing look like? To what genres does Bataille turn in pursuit of “l’indifférence des ruines”? And how does it relate to myth?

When Bataille creates equivalencies between poetry and sacrifice, it is tragic poetry in particular that he singles out: “La poésie tragique, où le thème introduit la destruction, à bien des égards est une forme de sacrifice” (OC XI: 103-4). His theorization of community is likewise marked by tragedy, such that community acquires “meaning in human terms only to the extent that it provides a place for tragedy, to the extent that it acknowledges the tragic spirit as its own reality” (Winfree 39). Tragedy (a term Bataille sometimes uses interchangeably with dramatization) takes us out of ourselves—wounds us—in order to facilitate communication: « Si nous ne savions dramatiser, nous ne pourrions sortir de nous-mêmes » (OC V: 23). As Kalliopi Nikolopoulou explains, “Dramatization is the movement by which a happening (a dromenon, an event) draws us in, in a way that we abandon our solitary selves to undergo the event in common, to experience compassion.” (100) It is the method of experiencing community. If Caillois (along with the other members of the College of Sociology)
rejected the novel as too solitary, tragedy is meant to be experienced communally.

Bataille’s definition of tragedy obviously diverges from standard generic understandings—to put it simply, he never wrote a play. And yet, inutility emerges as a shared pursuit of both Bataille’s conception of tragedy and more ancient iterations: “What lies at the heart of the most classic of the tragedies but the désoeuvrement of Oedipus as a man of knowledge and action? Tragedy, in a certain sense, is always the dramatization of such désoeuvrement” (Nikolopoulou 112). Bataille’s approach to writing sought to recreate the effects (and affects) of ancient drama (the literary corollary of mythic experience). Tragedy, like myth, is not primarily a form of discourse, but rather a way of being: « Le dramatique n’est pas être dans ces conditions-ci ou celles-là qui sont des conditions positives […] C’est simplement être » (OC V: 24). To the extent that we might call it discourse, it is “a mode of discourse in which the structure and meaning of discourse itself is sacrificed, sense opens to nonsense, knowledge to nonknowledge.” (Kendall, Inner xiii) And by exposing readers to this nonknowledge, he hoped to engender some form of community.

Though the terms “tragedy” and “dramatization” appear infrequently in Bataille’s writing, he creates clear links between tragedy and eroticism, a pairing that acquires increasing importance in his later work, most notably Les Larmes d’Eros:

Essentiellement le culte de Dionysos fut tragique. Il fut en même temps érotique, il le fut dans un désordre délirant, mais nous savons que, dans la mesure où le culte de Dionysos fut érotique, il était tragique… Avant tout d’ailleurs il était tragique, et c’est dans une horreur tragique que l’érotisme acheva de le faire entrer. […] Éros est avant tout le dieu tragique. (OC X: 606-07)

If eroticism represents the personal aspect of sovereignty, tragedy is its public face.

Tragedy as a genre is what allows Bataille to transfer the anguish and ecstasy of eroticism
and inner experience to a larger community—and ultimately to a political community. In *L’Expérience intérieure*, he posits the notion of tragedy as the literary corollary of torture; it is therefore fitting that the experience of physical torture is the catalyst for Robert and Charles’s sovereign (i.e. tragic) form of writing.

In *L’Abbé C*, it is the provocative combination of eroticism and betrayal that produces tragedy, and that therefore imagines political uses for seemingly non-political acts. Both tragedy and eroticism are defined by their opposition to actions or projects; this, however, does not damn them to political impotence. On the contrary, it is the tragedy/eroticism pairing that carries Bataille’s thought back to the political realm: “the tragic human being and the lover, respectively, bear more and more the burden of Bataille’s revolution” (Winfree 37). Winfree goes on to explain that “It is the necessity of exposure to the blind forces of chance that solicits tragic comportment and separates the tragic person from the dominant homogenous social order”—and this separation is vital to enacting political change (39). Tragedy offers Bataille a means of accessing the realm of political commitment while circumventing Sartre, for “The emotive intellectual conceives his life entirely at the moment of tragedy; that is his strength or his weakness, depending upon your view. In any case, it is what will save him after the war from parading under the banner of engagement raised by Sartre” (Besnier 18).

In Caillois’s reflections on the modern analogues of myth, he identifies first vacation, then war, as the recipients of the energies formerly directed toward revitalizing myths and rituals. Bataille held out hope that tragic, mythic writing, as enacted in novels like *L’Abbé C*, might help divert those energies back toward (useless) communal ends. Of course, it is impossible to determine what effect, if any, his writings actually had on the
postwar political landscape. What is clear is that Bataille, perhaps unwittingly, became a hero for poststructuralist theorists; in the hands of figures like Foucault, who dubbed Bataille “l’un des écrivains les plus importants de son siècle,” Bataille’s theorization of transgression became the linchpin of political thought in the late 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, by focusing their attention on transgression as a purely discursive phenomenon, at the expense of the affective or mystical facets of Bataille’s thought, one could argue (as Suzanne Guerlac has done) that the poststructuralists misappropriated Bataille’s writings. I maintain that even if post-structuralism found it expedient to ignore the more mythical aspects of Bataille’s work, affective, embodied experience, not writing, was always the object of Bataille’s impossible pursuit.

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121 For the writers associated with Tel Quel, Bataille’s transgression emerges as a theoretical term that elaborates a “‘transgression of philosophy,’ one performed by literature as it communicates with theory” (Guerlac 13).
Chapter Three
No Fantasy, Just Things: Claude Simon’s Politics of Experimentation

“When it was announced that Claude Simon had received the 1985 Nobel Prize for Literature, the reactions ranged from bemusement to unbridled animosity. Abroad, few readers had heard of him, and many were appalled at his selection over the likes of fellow finalists Jorge Luis Borges and Graham Greene. At home in France, interest in the *nouveau roman* had waned; though once lauded as the vanguard of literary experimentation, it had long ago been outflanked by the more radical *Tel Quel* group. To make matters worse, Simon had garnered a reputation as a “difficult” writer, and this at a moment when more traditional narrative forms were regaining traction among French writers. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Simon recalled the outraged reaction of French intellectuals: “In France, in literary circles, it was as though someone had made them swallow a hedgehog, whole, with all its needles.” He likewise noted that one French publication went so far as to attribute the Nobel Prize committee’s choice to the work of Soviet agents, an amusing claim considering Simon had long been criticized for his lack

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122 The New York Times article covering the announcement declared within the first few sentences: “Mr. Simon’s work […] is not widely known in the United States.” Though the names of the finalists are kept secret, Borges and Greene were widely considered front-runners for the prize.

123 Simon is perhaps best known as a *nouveau romancier*, though he often expressed misgivings about the moniker.
of political commitment. The irony was not lost on Simon, who addressed the absurdity of the accusation in his acceptance speech: “car enfin on a tellement, ici et là, dénoncé l'égoïste et vaine gratuité de ce que l'on appelle « l'art pour l'art » que ce n'est pas pour moi une mince récompense de voir mes écrits, qui n'avaient d'autre ambition que de se hisser à ce niveau, rangés parmi les instruments d'une action révolutionnaire et déstabilisatrice.”

Simon was no stranger to opposition and chose to confront many of his detractors directly in his Nobel speech, mentioning critiques of both his formal predilections and his political positions. In response to claims that his work was “‘laborieux,’ et donc forcément ‘artificiel,’” he felt obliged to point out that this last term merely means “fait avec art,” “qui est le produit de l'activité humaine et non celui de la nature”—a perfectly apt description of any novel. As for politics, he freely admitted: “je n'ai rien à dire, au sens sartrien de cette expression. D'ailleurs, si m'avait été révélée quelque vérité importante dans l'ordre du social, de l'histoire ou du sacré, il m'eût semblé pour le moins burlesque d'avoir recours pour l'exposer à une fiction inventée au lieu d'un traité raisonné de philosophie, de sociologie ou de théologie.” Yet Simon did resort to fiction, and I aim to show that it is precisely through his formal literary experimentation—an experimentation that reveals a preoccupation with myth—that Simon engages with

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124 The full text of Simon’s speech, in both French and English, is available on the Nobel Prize website (nobleprize.org). All future references to his speech are taken from that site.
125 He goes on to say: “On parle volontiers ici et là, et avec autorité, de la fonction et des devoirs de l'écrivain. On a même pu déclarer, il y a quelques années, non sans démagogie, par une formule qui porte en elle-même sa propre contradiction, que, « en face de la mort d'un petit enfant au Biafra, aucun livre ne fait le poids ». Si justement, à la différence de celle d'un petit singe, cette mort est un insupportable scandale, c'est parce que cet enfant est un petit d'homme c'est-à-dire un être doué d'un esprit, d'une conscience, même embryonnaire, susceptible plus tard, s'il survivait, de penser et de parler de sa souffrance, de lire celle des autres, d'en être à son tour ému et, avec un peu de chance, de l'écrire.”
political issues of the postwar period, carving out an alternative to the prevailing models for “political” writers: Sartrean *engagement* and socialist realism.

Taking into account his reputation as both laborious and lacking in substance, Simon may seem a counterintuitive exemplar of mythic discourse and political commitment. The *nouveaux romanciers* are hardly a homogenous group (as they have frequently acknowledged). Nonetheless, the genre can be broadly defined by its antipathy to the nineteenth century realist tradition and, Celia Britton argues, “an equally fundamental antagonism to the more modern notion of politically committed literature” (*Nouveau roman* 12). What the *nouveaux romanciers* found most objectionable in these twin enemies is a tendency toward totalizing historical narratives. The “new” novelist distinguishes himself from the old by a commitment to experimental language and form, the radical disjunction of time and space, and a heightened sense of ambiguity with regards to point of view, none of which seem immediately linked to either myth or politics. However, I aim to demonstrate that these strategies work to subvert reified forms of discourse and overcome alienation through unconventional community building.

Simon set himself apart from many of the other *nouveaux romanciers* by explicitly discussing history and politics in his novels (though often in skeptical or even satirical ways). *La Route des Flandres, La Bataille de Pharsale*, and *Les Géorgiques* all include some discussion of World War II; *Le Palace, Les Corps Conducteurs*, and *Histoire* address the Spanish Civil War. His decision to foreground such fraught historical events, rather than embrace pure formalism, indicates a sustained, personal

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126 The name, coined in 1957, was retroactively assigned to certain “experimental” authors, including Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, and Nathalie Sarraute.
investment in the recent past that his fellow *nouveaux romanciers* did not necessarily share. Though he mocks those writers who assign an overly didactic role to literature, such criticism should not be viewed as a rejection of *any* relationship between literature and politics, but rather an expression of dissatisfaction with the forms that relationship assumed in the 1950s and 1960s.\footnote{In *Le Palace*, he satirizes political writers through a description of the Latin American Writers Congress and their efforts to pen a political manifesto.}

Simon’s style is certainly not intended for the immediate or concise communication of ideologies. His sentences often continue for pages on end (a fact that has elicited comparisons to Proust and Faulkner); he uses little punctuation; he frequently interrupts himself mid-sentence; his dialogues contain few indications of who is speaking; his narration is decidedly non-linear, jumping between past and present without warning; he unapologetically eschews clear beginnings and endings. Though he insists that his work is unphilosophical and that blue collar workers are just as capable of commenting upon his novels as academics, his readership seems to skew more toward the latter than the former.\footnote{See Calle-Gruber, *Triptyques*, p.166.} All of these characteristics put him at odds with both the simple, concrete nature of myth (often focused on the natural world, basic social rituals, etc.) and the concision of political slogans. Nonetheless, as Simon maintains (and as I will demonstrate here), his seemingly abstract stylictics have much in common with the primordial elements of myth and seek to correct for the overly simplistic ideologies promulgated in certain postwar literary circles.
The Man, the Myth, the Legend

Born in 1913 in Madagascar and raised in Perpignan, France, Simon lost both his parents at a young age. His father, a cavalryman, was killed during World War I, when Simon was barely a year old. His mother died when he was eleven, and as a result he was sent off to boarding school. After briefly studying in England, where he tried his hand at painting, Simon embarked on travels in Spain, Germany, the Soviet Union, Italy, and Greece. He was present during the Spanish Civil War, though he denies claims that he participated in the fighting—despite his republican sympathies, his role was primarily that of observer. As a cavalryman during World War II, Simon was one of the few to survive the Battle of the Meuse, was taken prisoner by the Germans, and spent six months in a camp before escaping and joining the Resistance. Due to an inheritance, he was able to dedicate himself to writing full-time, publishing his first novel, *Le Tricheur*, in 1945. He produced some twenty-odd works before his death in 2005.

Simon’s novels are riddled with autobiographical elements, from his experiences in Spain and France to excerpts from his ancestors’ notebooks. However, the question remains: why did he choose to recount his exploits during the war in the form of the *nouveau roman*, rather than in a more traditional memoir? Reporters frequently asked about his experiences as a soldier (an interaction that is dramatized in *Le Jardin des Plantes*), and he wrote a much more straightforward account of his memories of World War II in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. Despite the non-realist style of his novels, Simon displayed an intense commitment to historical accuracy; the Fonds Simon at the

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129 It is important to note that, though he often wrote from life, he strongly resisted the autobiographical label.

Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet includes numerous historical documents related to both World War I and World War II, including official reports on the battle in which his father was killed, documents from the Archives militaires allemands à Freiburg im Breisgau, and excerpts from historical tomes such as La France a sauvé l’Europe (1947). In a letter written to Anthony Pugh in 1984, Simon gives a fairly neutral, un-poetic account of his activities with the 31st Dragoons with whom he fought during World War II. Nonetheless, La Route des Flandres remains the most fully realized account of his life as a soldier. What was appealing about this more experimental (and, I argue, mythic) form? What did it offer that more “realist” genres, like journalism, could not?

When Simon first entered the literary scene, countless writers were debating the possibilities and responsibilities of literature in a post-Auschwitz world, and Simon was no exception. He speaks in interviews about the “degré zéro” to which all of Europe was reduced in the wake of the war. The question posed by Dällenbach – is postwar writing possible – and its attendant query – what would such a writing look like? – haunted nearly every thinker of Simon’s generation. In a passage on Pierre Nora’s Les lieux de mémoire, David Carroll describes the isolation and alienation that dominated the postwar period:

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131 The following is a representative sample from the letter: « 16 mai – Décrochage. L’escadron bat en retraite toute la journée. Organise le soir la défense du village de Joncret. Faible bombardement d’artillerie. Contact à la tombée de la nuit avec premiers éléments ennemis. Ordre de décrocher vers environ minuit. »

132 Perhaps the most notable example is Theodor Adorno, whose oft-quoted (and misquoted) statement, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” became a sort of battle cry for political writers.

133 “All of us were faced by that at the end of the war, this form of tabula rasa, this questioning of all values. Shortly after the end of the war, my friend, the sociologist Edgar Morin, wrote a book entitled Germany, Year Zero, a title used by Rossellini for a film. But it wasn’t only Germany that had to start from scratch. It’s not mere chance that a bit later Roland Barthes wrote Le degré zéro de l’écriture...” (DuVerlie 48)
Never have people been as distanced or alienated from spontaneous, collective expressions of memory in their different natural milieux, distanced even from their own family memories and heritage, without a clear sense of belonging naturally and unreflectively to a single, unified, unquestioned heritage or national, ethnic, religious or political traditional or group, all of which had previously generated, stored and defended their own memories and the identities rooted in them. (“Thinking” 23-24)

This is precisely why myth becomes important in a postwar environment: the purpose of myth has always been to create and rejuvenate communities, to open lines of communication that transcend temporal and cultural barriers. Though the myths of the prewar era had been irrep- arably shattered, Simon, I argue, believed that myth could help us return to fundamentals and thereby evade isolation and despair. For many, demythification became an imperative of the postwar era due to myth’s reputation as falsely totalizing and prone to ideological manipulation. Yet, paradoxically, Simon employs myth itself as a corrective for the totalizing impulses of other grand narratives. As argued in my introduction, myth is inherently linked to notions of fragmentation, bricolage, and the destabilization of established forms, all of which allow it to evade the kinds of instrumentalization to which other discourses were subject.

Though I am hardly the first to recognize mythic or political strands in Simon’s writing, neither theme has received sufficient attention. Mária Minich Brewer offers a fairly comprehensive list of the kinds of interpretation to which Simon’s novels have been subject: phenomenological, modernist, elemental, formalist, realist, new novelist, and deconstructive, among others (xi). Britton in turn divides the scholarship into two categories: the first comprises phenomenological interpretations, stressing the themes of perception, imagination and memory; the second includes more formal readings of his texts as language-as-play (Writing the Visible 5). Neither myth nor politics fits
comfortably in either category. Dominique Viart makes important strides toward rehabilitating Simon as a politically committed figure, but, while acknowledging the mythic strands in Simon’s thought, he stops short of identifying a mythic mentality as the key to his engagement. The novelty of my contribution is to bring these previously opposed notions together, and to examine the manner in which Simon’s mythical or primordial impulses possess political potential. It is not merely that Simon invokes familiar mythological figures—though he does this in spades. Perseus, Goliath, Leonidas, Aeneas, Atreus, Achilles, Leda, Diana, Orion, and Orpheus all make appearances in his novels, as do Ovid, Virgil, and Hesiod. However, my interest lies not in myth as content, but in myth as form—that is, the ways in which Simon’s textual practices are in and of themselves mythic, irrespective of his object of inquiry.

It is difficult to discuss Simon’s novels independently of each other, as he not only recycles themes—he also repeats images, events, characters, and even whole passages. Nonetheless, my analysis hinges on his so-called “middle period” (which Britton describes as lasting roughly from 1957 to 1969, with Le Vent (1957) and La Bataille de Pharsale (1969) marking points of transition). Though Les Géorgiques (1981) postdates this phase by more than a decade, I nonetheless include it as part of the

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135 Dominique Viart explains that, « Contrairement à ce qui se passe avec les textes de Gide, de Cocteau, d’Anouilh dans la première moitié du siècle, le mythe n’est pas l’objet du texte, il n’y a pas de réécritures affichées comme telles (pas de 39ème actualisation d’Amphitryon, ni de nouveau Prométhée, bien ou mal enchaîné). Si le mythe apparaît – et il apparaît effectivement –, c’est avec un autre statut, comme un objet dans l’objet, une sorte de « thème » second – ce qui ne signifie pas forcément secondaire – dans l’économie de l’œuvre » (“Mythes” 270).
136 Thus, the events leading up to his capture during World War II, first presented in La Route des Flandres, reappear in Les Géorgiques; the image of the jealous man listening at the door of his unfaithful lover is present in both La Bataille de Pharsale and Histoire; etc.
137 Claude Simon, p. 2.
middle period, as it is widely thought to represent a return to an earlier style.

Furthermore, due to the significance of World War II for this project, I primarily focus on novels that directly address Simon’s experiences during the war, most notably *La Route des Flandres*, *La Bataille de Pharsale*, and *Les Géorgiques*.

Beyond merely including World War II as a theme, these novels are pertinent due to the particular convergence of myth and politics that they enact: coming after the more realist style of his early novels, yet before the heightened formalism of texts like *Leçon de choses* and *Triptyque*, his intermediate style occupies a liminal space between representational literature and pure textuality. Furthermore, Mireille Calle-Gruber points to the period from approximately 1958-1978 as important for Simon for at least three reasons: the development of a theoretical discourse on the *nouveau roman* (with colloquiums held at Cerisy in 1971 and 1975); the push for more overt political action from intellectuals like Sartre (as well as Simon’s growing tension with Sartre); and the translation of the Russian formalists, whom Simon greatly admired and cited as an influence on his own novelistic style (*Triptyques* 16). Using his novels, as well as interviews, essays, letters, and other peripheral texts, I will demonstrate Simon’s mythic and political investments, ultimately concluding that it is myth that allows Simon to highlight the shortcomings of other forms of political commitment and suggest an alternative to the cultural dominance of both Sartre and the French Communist party.

Before painting Simon’s mythic mode of cognition as a form of political engagement, it is first necessary to establish that his style, at least during the “middle” period, is indeed mythic. As previously mentioned, I am by no means the first to locate mythic threads in Simon’s work: though other adjectives are sometimes deployed
(including “primordial” and “sacred”), the terms are all related, and several critics have identified a mythic regression in Simon’s novels. Calle-Gruber, for example, speaks of “une sorte de régression aux origines mythiques et indistinctes de l’homme et du monde” (Vies de l’archive 218). Dällenbach, meanwhile, claims that “ce qui anime et propulse, si l’on peut dire, le texte simonien […] c’est l’espèce de régression infaillible […] régression à un temps ou à un hors-temps originaire” (Sur Claude Simon 72-73). Brewer views Simon’s “reappropriation of myth” as “linked inseparably to [his] critique of narrative and his experimentation with discursive modes and frames” (22). When preparing for a filmed interview with Simon for German television, Peter Brugger drafted a question about the link between Simon’s work and modern myths. Michel Thouillot sees myth, rather than history or epic, as the dominant vein in Simon’s novels. Building off of these interventions, I shall add the definition of myth set forth in my introduction and demonstrate that Simon does indeed adhere to each of its constituent parts: non-linear temporality, non-rationality, community, fusion, and bricolage.

138 In their introduction to the volume Claude Simon: A Retrospective, Jean H. Duffy and Alastair Duncan highlight the various critics who have drawn on Roger Caillois’s L’Homme et le sacré and on Mircea Eliade to argue that “Simon’s work is informed by a sense of the sacred, ‘un sacré sans divinité’” (9).
139 “Est-ce que vous confirmeriez l’opinion qu’un tel ordre du monde qui se produit toujours de nouveau dans le langage, a un certain rapport à la création des mythes (au sens exact du terme) ? Des mythes modernes, riches en mots, sans noms. Si c’est ainsi, qu’est-ce qu’il en restera dans le court-métrage de Triptyque où il n’y a pas de paroles ?” Cited in Les Triptyques de Claude Simon, ed. Calle-Gruber, p. 66.
140 “S’éloignant de la tentation du roman historique, comme d’ailleurs de la veine épique, qu’ils dédaignent, certains récits de guerre simoniens empruntent parfois également une autre voie que l’on pourrait qualifier de mythique, tant aux plans individuel ou familial que collectif » (85).
Temporal manipulation is a hallmark of Simon’s style.\textsuperscript{141} From the superimposition of multiple epochs in \textit{La Bataille de Pharsale} and \textit{Les Géorgiques} to the temporal expansions, contractions, and repetitions that characterize the narration of \textit{La Route des Flandres}, Simon consistently resists a coherent, linear temporality. His use of archaic imagery and his tendency to dissolve landscapes and characters alike into one undifferentiated primordial ooze transport the reader into an unfamiliar temporal register—“le temps de la Terre, un temps chthonien” (Janssens 90). Calle-Gruber characterizes Simon’s narrative logic as combinatory, rather than chronological.\textsuperscript{142}

During an interview with Simon, she draws a parallel between his temporal thinking and that of Saint Augustine, a comparison he finds fruitful:

\begin{quote}
MCG : Le rapport de vos récits au temps est en ce sens très proche de l’expérience phénoménologique décrite par saint Augustin : ‘C’est improprement que l’on dit : il y a trois temps, le passé, le présent et le futur. Plus exactement dirait-on peut-être : il y a trois temps, le présent du passé, le présent du présent, le présent du futur.

CS : Oui. Cela me fait penser aux vers d’Eliot que j’ai placés en exergue de \textit{L’Acacia} : ‘Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / and time future contained in time past.’
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{141} Francois Thierry found the theme significant enough in Simon’s corpus to dedicate an entire book to it (see \textit{Claude Simon: une expérience du temps}, 1997).

\textsuperscript{142} « On peut observer comment, dès le début, une logique combinatoire se superpose à la logique narrative traditionnelle, c’est-à-dire chronologique et téléologique » (\textit{Vies de l’archive} 101).
These sorts of temporal contradictions are pervasive in *La Bataille de Pharsale*, a novel loosely organized around Zeno’s paradox. The opening epigraph invokes Zeno through Paul Valéry’s poem “Le cimetière marin”:

Zénon! Cruel Zénon! Zénon d'Élée!
M'as-tu percé de cette flèche ailée
Qui vibre, vole, et qui ne vole pas!
Le son m'enfante et la flèche me tue!
Ah! le soleil . . . Quelle ombre de tortue
Pour l'âme, Achille immobile à grands pas!

The image of Achilles running motionless in the last line is an apt visual representation of Simon’s approach to time in the novel, wherein stasis intermingles with tremendous chronological shifts.  

Simon’s temporal manipulation goes beyond merely jumping between past and present, a technique that was common long before he emerged on the literary scene. He exaggerates the practice by placing temporal shifts mid-sentence, such that modern-day trucks suddenly appear alongside a Napoleonic general, or the cries of an old woman in World War II are simultaneously perceived as the lamentations of antiquity. Furthermore, the narration does not merely leap into the past of a given character through the work of memory, but also the past of that character’s ancestors, and even of the earth itself.

What Simon presents is not the inexorable march of time, but rather a fluid, meandering temporal model where ancient and modern battles are waged palimpsestically.

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143 This same image emerges in *Les Géorgiques*, wherein the narrator describes time as “à la fois statique et emballé, l’Histoire se mettant à tournoyer sur place, sans avancer, avec de brusques retours en arrière, d’imprévisible crochets, errant sans but” (382).

144 In *La Route des Flandres*, numerous parallels are drawn between de Reixach and his ancestor, both of whom died from a bullet wound to the head. This temporal displacement is augmented even further by the ubiquitous comparison to ancient rituals, Greek mythology, and primordial landscapes.
Though Simon’s temporal playfulness assumes numerous forms, repetition is perhaps the most commented upon. It rears its head on various scales: individuals repeat actions across a lifetime, sons repeat the behaviors of their fathers, historical events repeat across the centuries, and nature repeats herself on a geological level. In *Les Géorgiques*, these various categories of repetition mimic one another, such that historical repetition (particularly the recurrence of violent conflicts) echoes agricultural repetition (the cycles of nature). Both kinds of patterns require infinite patience:

> Quelque chose d’aussi cyclique, d’aussi régulier que le retour des aiguilles d’une montre sur les mêmes chiffres d’un cadran, mois après mois, saison après saison, pendant qu’il courait en tous sens d’un bout à l’autre de l’Europe avec ses canons, ses tables de tir et ses interminables états de matériel. Quoique si l’on y réfléchit les deux choses ne soient pas tellement contradictoires. Je veux dire en ce qui concerne les qualités requises. Je veux parler de cet éternel recommencement, cette inlassable patience ou sans doute passion qui rend capable de revenir périodiquement aux mêmes endroits pour accomplir les mêmes travaux : les mêmes prés, les mêmes champs, les mêmes vignes, les mêmes haies à regarnir, les mêmes clôtures à vérifier, les mêmes villes à assiéger, les mêmes rivières à traverser ou à défendre, les mêmes tranchées périodiquement ouvertes sous les mêmes remparts. (440-41)

Even in works that ostensibly address singular historical events, Simon undermines the notion of uniqueness by positing revolution as repetition rather than rupture. In the opening epigraph of *Le Palace*, a novel centered on the Spanish Civil War, Simon defines revolution as “mouvement d’un mobile qui, parcourant une courbe fermée, repasse successivement par les mêmes points.” Hence, the cosmic revolution governing the

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145 In *La Bataille de Pharsale*, for example, the narrator describes the monumental forces and repeated cataclysms that have shaped the earth over the course of millions of years: “épaisseurs profondes de la terre […] de choses concassées calcinées lentement écrasées par le poids de millions et de millions d’années forêts englouties pétifiées fougères de pierre animaux poissons aux arêtes de basalte obscure gestation” (161). Peter Janssens (glossing Philippe Bonnefis) claims that Simon’s writing is modeled on “plissements géologiques” (18).

146 This pairing is frequently referred to as “la terre et la guerre,” which was also the title of a 1981 issue of *Critique* dedicated to Simon’s work.
motion of celestial bodies takes precedence over petty political revolutions. This image of successively passing through the same points can be considered a keystone for Simon’s novels. In his introduction to *Orion aveugle*, he describes his writing process allegorically through the figure of Orion, who blindly crosses and re-crosses the same paths incessantly: “il tourne et retourne sur lui-même, comme peut le faire un voyageur égaré dans une forêt, revenant sur ses pas, repartant, trompé (ou guidé?) par la ressemblance de certains lieux, pourtant différents…” (13-14). In the manuscript for *La Bataille de Pharsale*, Simon sketched a series of overlapping paths, providing a visual representation of the repetition experienced by both his characters (who return time and time again to seemingly identical fields in search of the site of the titular Battle of Pharsalus) and his readers.

Simon’s fondness for repetition has led some critics to view him as cynical or apolitical. If historical tragedies (wars, failed revolutions, etc.) are fated to recur, then man is little more than a pawn in a larger cosmic game. However, I maintain that repetition is instead an organizing principle that helps to arrest the chaos he perceives in human experience, a means of replacing flux with duration, of reintegrating man into universal rhythms. In *Les Géorgiques*, for example, the repetitions of nature offer a sense of comfort and constancy amidst the tumults of History:

c’étaient les mêmes chemins, les mêmes mares gelées, les mêmes forêts silencieuses qu’avaient traversés et retraversés les hordes successives de pillards, d’incendiaires et d’assassins, depuis celles venues du fond de l’Asie […] et après d’autres encore, et toujours les mêmes vallées, les flancs des mêmes collines,

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147 This is also the position taken by Gould in her reading of Simon: “in the face of the apparently pervasive disorder reflected both in consciousness and in human experience, an underlying continuity persists throughout Simon’s novels that recognizes the significance of ritual, repetition, and the possibility of transcendence in the activities of our daily lives” (3).
escaladées, franchies, ravagées, refranchies, ravagées de nouveau […] les mêmes ciels de verre limpide, glacés, ou noircis au fusain, les mêmes ondulations de collines, les mêmes halliers propices aux embuscades. (134-35)

As Karen Gould explains, “These mythic settings appear to be the only stable elements in an otherwise perpetually changing universe” (4).

To further complicate matters, Simon does not merely describe historical events in such a way as to highlight repetition over time; different eras actually interpenetrate one another, so that the divisions between them disappear almost entirely in an “intolérable promiscuité” (Janssens 52). At the beginning of Les Géorgiques, the three time periods being described – the Ancien Régime, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II – are clearly separated from one another by typographical distinctions (specifically, the alternation of italicized and non-italicized font), yet this distinction begins to break down as the novel progresses: first, the eras exchange typographical markers (that which was non-italicized is now italicized, and vice versa); by the end, the boundaries between the eras have dissolved entirely.148 Simon provides a useful visual analog to this narrative practice in L’Herbe, wherein Louise compares Sabine’s sense of time to a dial “apparemment constitué par plusieurs cadrans superposés ou, si l’on préfère, concentriques, à la façon de ceux de ces horloges astronomiques […] l’aiguille pointant donc dans le même instant sur plusieurs indications…” (203). If repetition over time still implies a sort of linear progression, here it cedes to simultaneity and non-temporality.

148 A similar technique occurs in La Bataille de Pharsale, though with even less of a boundary between the italicized and non-italicized sections. From the beginning of the novel, the two narratives are intercalated every few words, tangled in a linguistic Gordian knot.
For Gould, one of the features of Simon’s mythic mode of cognition is the recognition of “an underlying oneness in past, present, and future environment” (5). When describing the Gypsies in *Les Géorgiques*, Simon focuses on their seeming ability to manipulate time: « investis de ces occultes pouvoirs qui leur conféraient le don non pas de jeter des sorts ou de prédire l’avenir mais en quelque sorte de le préfigurer, c’est-à-dire d’accélérer le temps, confondant passé présent et futur dans un même creuset, assimilant transformant en objets archaïques, primitifs et démantibulés tout ce qu’il approchaient ou touchaient, restituant au chaos, à la matière originelle… » (214). In the opening passage of *La Bataille de Pharsale*, the arrow sailing through the air is described as simultaneously a recollection of the past and a warning of things to come, thus confusing temporal registers.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlines Simon’s conception of time as follows: « Le rapport passé-présent n’est pas le rapport d’un espace-temps à un espace-temps. Le rapport présent-passé est le rapport d’un temps-espace à un autre qui le déchire […] La simultanéité du temps est cela : la coexistence en lui de présents incomposables ». This simultaneity appears not only in Simon’s fiction, but also in non-fictional accounts of his lived experiences. Reflecting on his time as a prisoner-of-war, he projects himself onto a much more ancient image, identifying with the Jewish captives being led to Babylon:

Voyez-vous, quand, prisonnier, exténué, crevant de faim et de soif, je retraversais avec des milliers d’autres la Belgique à pieds, ce qui m’a le plus aidé, c’a été de me dire […] : Je vois donc une chose difficile! et plus même: Je vois une chose de tous les temps. Parce que je pensais que le cortège des Juifs emmenés en captivité

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à Babylone il y a des siècles, eh bien, hormis les costumes et le paysage, ça devait être assez exactement la même chose.\footnote{Claude Simon, “Un homme traversé par le travail”, entretien avec Alain Poirson, \textit{La Nouvelle Critique}, n 105, juin-juillet 1977.}

Here, the use of archaic imagery does not cynically underscore the inevitable repetition of tragedy, but rather provides comfort by projecting the individual out of his isolated condition and into a collective one that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries.\footnote{This type of comfort likewise emerges in \textit{La Route des Flandres}, when Georges reflects that he has read about experiences comparable to his own: « Je lui dirai que j’avais déjà lu en latin ce qui m’est arrivé, ce qui fait que je n’ai pas été trop surpris et même dans une certaine mesure rassuré de savoir que c’avait déjà été écrit » (94).}

Thus, the narrative tension in Simon’s novels does not emerge from the gradual revelation of plot details (especially given that some of his works barely contain what we might conventionally call a “plot”). Instead, the momentum comes from his experimentation with different temporal registers. Every character is simultaneously present and absent, living and dead: « L’image simonienne a donc cette capacité de bouleverser et d’intervertir les catégories temporelles et de faire apparaître la mort comme à la fois déjà advenue et encore à venir, atteignant par là doublement le lecteur » (Hanhart-Marmor 234). Already in \textit{Le Vent} (1957), Simon employs two competing conceptions of time, which Brewer identifies as “the temporal model of rationality, causality, and continuity” and a temporality that is “discontinuous, reversible, and aleatory” (6). This formulation is useful insofar as it highlights the relationship between Simon’s temporal techniques and his approach to rationality (which, as I explain later, he ultimately rejects as broken).

This “irrational” (that is, non-linear or non-causal) temporality, which at moments is closer to an absence of temporality, is most salient in Simon’s frequent use of the
present participle, which creates the sensation of a perpetual present. Even when characters retreat into memory, they experience it as the present, thus further destabilizing the distinction between different temporal registers. Characters are likewise often thrust into either a non-temporal stasis or a sort of cosmic time (i.e. prehistoric time, time immemorial) in which nature dominates man and an unfamiliar logic prevails. In *Les Géorgiques*, for example, the soldiers experience: « l’état (temps, espace, froid) où devait être le monde à l’époque des cavernes, des mammouths, des bisons, et autres bêtes gigantesques chassées par des hommes gigantesques pour prendre leurs fourrures, boire leur sang chaud, au sein de gigantesques et inépuisables forêts » (118). Though one of the most pervasive themes in Simon’s work, temporality ultimately (and paradoxically) ceases to matter due to its fundamental instability. While being transported as prisoners of war, Blum asks Georges the time, to which Georges responds: “Qu’est-ce que ça peut faire?” (70) Time is unimportant when events transpire « Comme si tout cela […] ne se passait pas à l’époque des fusils, des bottes de caoutchouc, des rustiques et des costumes de confection mais très loin dans le temps, ou de tous les temps, ou en dehors du temps » (60).

*La déesse Raison la Vertu*

Like many writers of the postwar era, Simon recognized the limitations of Enlightenment rationality and the naïveté of an unwavering faith in the redemptive power of rational humanism. As he put it in an interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy, “Le ‘trou noir’ d’Auschwitz (sans parler du Goulag) a rendu tout discours ‘humaniste’ simplement indécent” (qtd. Carroll, “Thinking” 35). Having acknowledged these twentieth-century
atrocities as an irremediable point of rupture for the Western world and its philosophical traditions, Simon sought a return to primordial things:

If surrealism was born of the 1914-18 war, post-Second-World-War developments are linked to Auschwitz. That is often forgotten, it seems to me, when people speak about the Nouveau Roman. It’s not for nothing that Nathalie Sarraute has written *L’Ere du soupcon*, or Barthes *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*: that artists like Tapies or Dubuffet started with graffiti, with walls, or that Louise Nevelson made sculpture out of rubble. Ideologies were all discredited; humanism a spent force. […] let’s try to go back to the primordial, the elementary, matter, things.152

Thus, his rejection of post-Enlightenment rationality goes hand-in-hand with a desire to return to the concreteness of myth.

One of the most pervasive themes in Simon’s fiction is an attack against History—that is, an attack against the totalizing narratives that seek to rationalize even the most radically incomprehensible experiences. In a sort of proto-postmodern gesture, Simon rejects the belief that History is meaningful, offering an apocalyptic worldview in place of a historical one.153 A representative example of this antipathy toward “textbook,” or explanatory, History is provided by Blum in *La Route des Flandres*: « l’Histoire (ou si tu préfères: la sottise, le courage, l’orgueil, la souffrance) ne laisse derrière elle qu’un résidu abusivement confisqué, désinfecté et enfin comestible, à l’usage des manuels scolaires agréés et des familles à pedigree… » (177) And as Britton explains, a rejection of History is likewise a rejection of “the belief in progress, the social perfectibility of mankind and ‘la déesse Raison la Vertu’ (RF 312) that stems from eighteenth-century rationalism. […]

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153 As Peter Janssens writes, « C’est une minutieuse négation de l’Histoire que *La Route des Flandres* donne à lire. Apocalyptique plutôt qu'historique, le récit ne se fait que heurté, entrecoupé, décentré à la façon de cette *route* qui est d’abord *rupture* » (10).
What he rejects, in other words, is the belief in civilization and the harmonious progress of mankind towards reason and virtue, the belief that violence is not – as he thinks it is – permanent and ineradicable” (Writing the Visible 147). Simon’s attitude toward History is therefore one of skepticism and negativity: “Simon’s novels […] are testimonies to the non-recuperable negativity of history and the destruction of progressive, humanist historical myths and illusions. The novels are skeptical of History’s greatness, and they bear witness rather to the insignificant experiences and the ‘little stories’ such greatness necessarily excludes” (Carroll, “Thinking” 34). In his analysis of Les Géorgiques, Viart foregrounds Simon’s pervasive critiques of Rousseau – “ce Suisse mélomane, effusionniste, et philosophe” (RF 201) – as well as of more contemporary humanists, ranging from Rudyard Kipling (in La Route des Flandres) to Graham Greene (in La Bataille de Pharsale), each deemed equally guilty of naïve humanistic conceptions (Mémoire 246). Peter Janssens perhaps puts it most succinctly: « ces guerres soufflèrent les fondements de la culture qui se voulait héritière des Lumières » (9).

According to Britton, the repetitions and wanderings that characterize Simon’s style are a means of expressing his disillusionment with linear conceptions of history and demonstrate a certain alliance with the “irrational”:

Movement which never achieves anything and has no definitive goal, ‘errance’ undercuts the rationalist conception of history as progress. Occasionally, in fact, the text makes a specific causal connection between ‘errance’ and the irrational – i.e. invisible, ungraspable – nature of historical reality: at the end of Le Palace the image of history concretized as the invisible, unnamable, monstrous corpse is what makes the soldiers wander aimlessly round the city, what makes them regress to the natural, a-historical state of animals – in this case, vultures. (Writing the Visible 153)
Errance becomes a powerful political force in an era of mistrust toward linear narratives and the notion of history as progress. If the heroes of Romanticism and modernism wander as an expression of either nostalgia for a lost paradise or alienation amidst unfamiliar urban landscapes, the wandering of Simon’s protagonists is simultaneously less monumental and more politically engaged. The importance of wandering cannot be underestimated, especially in light of the numerous titles Simon considered for La Route des Flandres that allude to roving (including Méandres, L’Errance, Les Pas-Perdus, Contre-Marche, and Allées et Venues). Each emphasizes the non-progressive nature of a history whose end result is unmitigated slaughter.

One of the most commonly cited examples of Simon’s loss of faith in Enlightenment values is the discussion of the Leipzig bombings in La Route des Flandres. Georges’ father writes him a letter decrying the destruction of the Leipzig library and all of the knowledge it contained, “l’héritage de plusieurs siècles,” to which Georges responds: “si le contenu des milliers de bouquins de cette irremplaçable bibliothèque avait été précisément impuissant à empêcher que se produisent des choses comme le bombardement qui l’a détruite, je ne voyais pas très bien quelle perte représentait pour l’humanité la disparition sous les bombes au phosphore de ces milliers de bouquins et de papelards manifestement dépourvus de la moindre utilité” (211).

Reflecting on that passage during an interview with DuVerlie, Simon comments:

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154 This list of potential titles forms part of the manuscript for La Route des Flandres at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet.

155 This sentiment echoes Nietzsche’s frustration with the accumulation of books as a replacement for true knowledge in The Birth of Tragedy: “Our art reveals this universal distress: […] in vain does one accumulate the entire ‘world-literature’ around modern man for his comfort; in vain does one place oneself in the midst of the art styles and artists of all ages, so that one may gives names to them as Adam did to the beasts: one still remains eternally hungry, the ‘critic’ without joy and energy, the Alexandrian man, who is
All of us were faced by that at the end of the war, this form of *tabula rasa*, this questioning of all values. [...] About a year and a half ago, I was invited to a Franco-German colloquium during which the German writers tried to explain to us just how the generation of twenty to thirty year olds felt itself completely lost and disoriented at the end of the war, doubting everything after the cataclysm and horror from which they emerged. And I said to them: “You weren’t the only ones; everyone in the West was confronted by the same situation, the same total bankruptcy of 2000 years of ‘humanistic’ thought ending in the Nazi camps, on the one hand, and the Goulag on the other.” (48)

Faced with this “bankruptcy of humanistic thought,” Simon rejects anthropocentric models of the universe in favor of ones in which man is reduced to the level of object. He praises the paintings of Cézanne and Vermeer, for example, for paying “equal attention […] to the whole surface of the canvas. What a great blow to humanism!” (DuVerlie 50), and sets himself in opposition to the art historian Elie Faure (whom he frequently cites in his novels). Faure, as a devoted humanist, critiques the curious practice among German painters of devoting equal attention to a leaf and a human figure, a rock and an allegorical representation.156 Simon is quite happy to return the rock to its rightful place, as an equally worthy, if not superior, object of representation. By placing everything on the same plane (a form of *chosisme*), Simon is able to produce unexpected juxtapositions: the glory of battle and a soldier’s search for bread;157 religious icons and a chamber pot;158 the execution of the Russian Imperial family and a child’s cold.159

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156 Here is one such example from *La Bataille de Pharsale*: “O. lit dans une Histoire de l’Art le chapitre sur les peintres allemands de la Renaissance […] On les voit, dans leurs tableaux, donner la même importance à une hallebarde qu’à un visage humain, à une pierre inerte qu’à un corps en mouvement, dessiner un paysage comme une carte de géographie, apporter, dans la décoration d’un édifice, autant de soins à une horloge à marionnettes qu’à la statue de l’Espérance ou de la Foi, traiter cette statue avec les mêmes procédés que cette horloge” (238).

157 See *Les Géorgiques*, p. 44.

158 See *La Bataille de Pharsale*, p. 4.

Of course, an attack against rational humanism is not identical to an embrace of irrationality. Simon did not immerse himself in the irrational in the same manner as the Surrealists, for example. He showed little interest in the unconscious and its so-called irrational desires and motivations. His goal was merely to underscore the absurdity of a belief in transcendental truth and mastery of the world through scientific knowledge.

Some critics, in fact, have located a lingering humanism in Simon’s writing (despite his own remarks to the contrary); and I admit that he does strive to recuperate some sort of meaning or goodness from existence, even if History and reason are no longer acceptable sources of that meaning.160 In an interview published in 1961, Simon explained:

Par un curieux renversement, ce monde usé par le désastre apparaît finalement plus riche que toutes les formes qu’il détruit. La mort y règne partout ; mais elle ne peut empêcher une autre puissance – qu’il faut bien appeler la vie – d’avoir le dernier mot. […] C’est plutôt sa profusion, son lyrisme qui nous écrasent, comme si, délivrés de croire que nous existions, nous découvrions, dans sa ruine même, l’obscur et jubilante confusion de l’existence.161

What prevents Simon from fully entering humanist territory is precisely his interest in the non-rational facets of existence, as well as his emphasis on self-loss as a necessary first step towards integrating with others.

**Of Hybrids and Primordial Ooze**

Another trademark of Simon’s style is his tendency to present boundaries as permeable. Humans and landscapes merge into one another; rocks and trees assume the

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160 Mortan P. Levitt, for example, places humanism at the center of Simon’s work in his essay “Modernist Survivor: The Later Fiction of Claude Simon.” Cécile Yapaudjian-Labat likewise considers the multiple and often ambiguous values that the concept of “humanism” acquires in Simon's novels, and concludes that, late in life, Simon advanced a quasi-humanist conception of literature, wherein: “la littérature peut toucher l’homme, le rendre meilleur ou plus heureux. Entreprise solitaire, l’acte d’écriture a une visée universelle” (115).

same status as men; soldiers fuse with animals or inanimate objects, creating bizarre hybrid creatures.\textsuperscript{162} In \textit{La Route des Flandres}, for example, the narrator describes the prisoners “comme la couleur même de la guerre, de la terre, s’emparant d’eux peu à peu, eux, leurs visages terreux leurs loques terreuses, leurs yeux terreux aussi, de cette teinte sale, indistincte qui semblait les assimiler déjà à cette argile, cette boue, cette poussière d’où ils étaient sortis et à laquelle, errants, honteux, hébétés et tristes, ils retournaient chaque jour un peu plus” (162). Georges, the cynical narrator of \textit{La Route des Flandres}, alludes to Ovid’s \textit{The Metamorphoses} while reflecting on his own dehumanized form in the wagon full of prisoners: « il me semble que j’ai lu quelque part une histoire comme ça, des types métamorphosés d’un coup de baguette en cochons ou en arbres ou en cailloux, le tout par le moyen de vers latins… » (94). The quintessential example of this phenomenon is the recurring image of the dead horse in \textit{La Route des Flandres}, whose decaying matter fuses imperceptibly with the mud in which it is encased. Seeing the horse for the first time, Georges describes it as « déjà à moitié absorbé semblait-il par la terre, comme si celle-ci avait déjà sournoisement commencé à reprendre possession de ce qui était issu d’elle, n’avait vécu que par sa permission et son intermédiaire (c’est-à-dire l’herbe et l’avoine dont le cheval s’était nourri » (26).\textsuperscript{163} Simon’s description of the coloration of a postcard in \textit{Triptyque} provides a useful model for his overall narrative technique: « L’encrage des différentes couleurs ne coïncide pas exactement avec les contours de chacun des objets, de sorte que le vert cru des palmiers déborde sur le bleu du

\textsuperscript{162} Lynn A. Higgins offers a fairly comprehensive list of hybrid creatures in \textit{La Route des Flandres} in her chapter “Gender and War Narrative in \textit{La Route des Flandres}” in \textit{Claude Simon}. Ed. Celia Britton. p. 207. The most notable is, of course, the centaur; Simon frequently depicts men and their mounts merging into a single being.

\textsuperscript{163} Janssens dedicates sixty pages of his text \textit{Claude Simon: Faire l’histoire} to the significance of the horse in Simon’s œuvre.
ciel, le mauve d’une écharpe ou d’une ombrelle mordue sur l’ocre du sol ou le cobalt de la mer » (7). As Dällenbach notes, this passage highlights “the extent to which things are always running into each other in the novel” (“Mise-en-abyme” 151).

The war experience in particular lends itself to a chaotic lack of differentiation:

War renders men indistinguishable from each other, from animals, from objects, from corpses. The novel teems with hybrids. […] These and literally hundreds of other examples of disintegration and blending evoke the terror of the uncanny, as they transgress the boundaries between categories usually reassuringly distinct: self and other, men and animals, living and inanimate matter. War assimilates everything to the same colour (the colour of earth) and a single texture: a disgusting viscosity. (Higgins 207)

However, this “disgusting viscosity” is not a purely negative phenomenon. Ontological instability may result in confusion and chaos, but it also marks a return to more mythic, primordial forces, to a time when communion with the world was possible, thus suggesting an alternative to nihilism or absurdism. In a revision of Rimbaud’s famous line, “Je est un autre,” Simon suggests instead that, “Je est d’autres. D’autres choses, d’autres sons, d’autres personnes, d’autres lieux, d’autres temps” (La Corde raide 174).

Fusion likewise presents the possibility of repair in the wake of destruction. In La Route des Flandres, Simon offers a lengthy description of a drop of water on the edge of a roof: it breaks off, falls, then immediately reforms—an endless cycle wherein any “rupture” is instantly mended.164 Ideally, myth offers a comparable system of restoration for fractured humans.

164 « Le phénomène se décomposant de la façon suivante : la goutte s’étirant en poire sous son propre poids, se déformant, puis s’étranglant, la partie inférieure – la plus grosse – se séparant, tombant, tandis que la partie supérieure semble remonter, se rétracter, comme aspirée vers le haut aussitôt après la rupture, puis se regonfle aussitôt par un nouvel apport, de sorte qu’un instant après il semble que ce soit la même goutte qui pende, s’enfle de nouveau, toujours à la même place, et cela sans fin » (24).

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At times, undifferentiation provides comfort and sustenance to characters who find the isolation of their individual experiences unendurable. Dällenbach sees these fusions as a means of reuniting with the cosmos: «se perdre dans l’autre, participer au rythme binaire primordial, régresser au stade de l’élémentaire, s’incorporer la vitalité animale ou retrouver la passivité des plantes, se répandre dans le cosmos et laisser le cosmos le pénétrer, tel est le désir forcené de mue et d’osmose du mort-vivant [...] dans les plus fortes pages de la Route des Flandres…» (Sur Claude Simon 73). Abandoning the confines of the body thus becomes a form of liberation. The slippage between self and world — the regression to primordial matter — opens up new possibilities for Simon’s characters: «les romans de Simon nous donnent non pas la jouissance apollinienne de la forme close, finie, achevée, mais celle, dionysiaque ou baroque, d’une forme en train de naître et de prendre possession de l’espace, riche encore de la materia prima, d’où elle a été extraite, et inséparable de la force qui la génère et la sous-tend» (Dällenbach, Claude Simon 99). Because these moments of undifferentiation often occur in the midst of violence, the tendency has been to read the loss of self as a purely negative consequence of war. Yet the presentation of less rigidly delineated subjects provides a certain degree of escape from a seemingly inexorable destiny.

Part of this escape involves a return to nature (though Simon’s formulation of the idea is less sentimental than that of the Romantics). In his correspondence with the art brut painter Jean Dubuffet, whose work he greatly admired, Simon insists that the image of man encased in nature is one of the most interesting themes in Dubuffet’s work:

L’une des choses qui me frappe et me séduit (parmi d’autres) c’est, dans ces variations, cette partition que vous assignez à l’homme, non plus régnant sur mais englobé, ou plutôt encastré au sein de la nature (minérale ou végétale) qui parfois...
(dans un processus et un mouvement suivant à la fois ceux de la main et des choses) le submerge, le biffe, l’enveloppe de filets plus ou moins enchevêtrés, jusqu’à l’effacer en certaines circonstances (pourrait-on dire le ‘digérer’ ?...). Pas de perspective, pas de ‘loin’ ni de ‘près’ (pas plus qu’il n’en existe dans la mémoire ou dans la sensation) (57-58).

Given that Simon openly compared his work to that of Dubuffet, we might conclude that this submersion in nature, the effacement of man’s individual identity, is likewise an idea that Simon strived to incorporate into his novels.

Though at times Simon seems to undermine his opposition to individuation by focusing on the particularity of characters and spaces, these seemingly vivid details are almost always ultimately effaced. Viart points out, for example, that though *La Route des Flandres* is rife with references to real geographical locations, upon closer inspection the reader discovers a false geography. Many of the towns he names are nowhere near the actual battle (*Mémoire* 199). Furthermore, words like “même” and “identique” abound: « aux mêmes lieux, aux mêmes rivages, aux mêmes places fortes, aux mêmes fleuves, sous les mêmes remparts […] sisyphéen, repassant chaque fois par le même carrefour » (*Géorgiques* 239). Thus, specific locations metamorphose into *lieux communs*. This commonality allows Simon to emphasize the universal features of the wartime experience: « Quel que soit l’endroit, l’absurdité, la destruction demeurent les mêmes » (*Mémoire* 200).

Though transformations and mutations occur on both the human and non-human level, Simon employs many techniques that foreground the interchangeability of various characters — that is, the oscillation between self and other (and the ultimate dissolution of the boundary between them). In *La Route des Flandres*, this occurs through his misleading use of personal pronouns when recounting the conservations between Georges
and Blum in the prison camp. The alternation between « et toi… et moi… » (in which it is unclear which character is the “moi”) gives way to « et Blum (ou Georges)… et Georges (ou Blum)… » (177); Georges finally confesses that he does not know if he’s speaking to Blum or to himself (176). Merleau-Ponty, in his notes on Simon, likewise refers to the use of “intermediate pronouns” and “intermediate verbal modes” which have the effect of displacing subjectivity.¹⁶⁵ This slippage between Georges and Blum is described by Lynn Higgins as a form of bonding, thus reinforcing a positive reading of the loss of individuality.

**The One and the Many**

Ultimately, the oscillation between one character and another transitions to the indeterminacy and interchangeability of entire groups. Simon’s description of the World War II cavalrymen in *Les Géorgiques*, for example, makes it impossible to determine whether multiple soldiers are performing the same actions, or whether a single soldier is repeating himself: « cela recommence, c’est-à-dire un autre cheval et un autre cavalier arrêtés (mais peut-être est-ce le même type et le même cheval, ou peut-être que le cavalier arrêté c’est maintenant lui, et que c’est lui aussi qui, à son tour, émet des bruits bizarres, méprisables) » (98). This in turn leads to a decentering of individual identity in favor of a communal one. Mythic decentering, however, should not be confused with decentering in the postmodern sense, which is predicated upon the absence of a center,

¹⁶⁵ “We no longer read I or he
Intermediate pronouns are born, a first-second person
and thus an absence of meaning. For Frederic Jameson, “loss of the center equals the death of the subject, and it engenders a crisis auguring the death of meaning, history, aesthetic inquiry, and temporality” (Shirvani 292). However, I maintain that the loss of subjectivity catalyzed by myth and present in Simon’s novels is less fatalistic, retaining the potential to generate (rather than merely destabilize) signification. If postmodern decentering provokes anxiety in the face of ever-shifting and conflicting identities, mythic decentering forges a path to renewed unity. Viart, for example, sees in Simon’s novels « le sentiment de l’unité [qui] dissout celui de l’individualité du sujet » (Mémoire 219). Characters who feel unanchored, haunted by the conviction that life has no meaning, are able to locate some sense of comfort in this privileging of community over individuality.

The violence and traumas that Simon describes are as much about ruptures within communities as they are about individual suffering. Brewer describes how L’Acacia progresses from the story of an individual mourning the loss of his father to a series of attempts by the narrator to repair a severance from and break in the possibility of community. […] The transition from being an object of sacrifice, a hunted animal rejected and expelled from the human community, to becoming a social and ethical person once more, a subject in a community of subjects, is a difficult one, but becoming Other may be taken as a condition of becoming a subject in an ethical sense, of recognizing a reciprocity between self and Other. In a postwar perspective Simon’s writing provides a particularly thoughtful questioning of what constitutes a reinvention of the social tie or bond. (141)

Myth, then, emerges as a means of reinserting the individual into the social. Individual identity is recast as merely a fragment of the universal: « Cependant, homme parmi les hommes, avec mes besoins et mes désirs d’homme, ma réalité, quoique particulière, est un fragment de l’universel » (Calle-Gruber, Triptyques 161). Gould, in her analysis of
myth in Simon’s œuvre, claims that, “the role of ritual is to provide a perennial form for human life, and to project the individual out of his or her particular identity, into a universal mold” (127). The privileging of the universal over the particular is thus a form of endurance or preservation. Brewer claims that the mythic images conjured up by Georges and Blum as they while away the hours in prison in La Route des Flandres sustain them in the midst of a disintegrating world (22).

In this way, the loss of individuality is not seen as something to be mourned, but rather as a positive recuperation of community. It is a means of overcoming alienation and granting universal resonances to the voice of the solitary writer. If Cesare Pavese struggled to reconcile his desire to participate in a community with the solitary nature of writing, Simon circumscribes this problem by revealing the communal nature of the communicative act.

**The Cobbler Triumphant**

Simon spoke quite openly of his fondness for *bricolage*; in the introduction to *Orion aveugle*, for example, he describes his motivation for writing the book as the “seul désir de ‘bricoler’ quelque chose à partir de certaines peintures que j’aime” (12). Similar to collage, *bricolage* describes the assembly of a text from the heterogeneous materials at hand, without subordinating construction to the constraints of a preconceived project. Most importantly for Lévi-Strauss, *bricolage* is the main motivating force of mythic thought, used to illustrate the link between primitive, mythical ideas and the scientific rationalism of the industrial world.
The connection between Simon and Lévi-Strauss is worth stressing, especially since Simon admitted to being inspired by Lévi-Strauss’s theorization of *bricolage*.\(^\text{166}\) As Brewer notes,

Simon critics have emphasized writing as formal assemblage at the expense of Lévi-Strauss’s more interesting discussion of the historicity of the materials and instruments at the disposal of mythical thought. ‘But the possibilities always remain limited by the particular history of each piece.’ For Lévi-Strauss the elements which the ‘bricoleur’ collects and uses are ‘pre-constrained’ because ‘like the constitutive units of myth … they are drawn from the language where they already possess a meaning, which sets a limit on their freedom of manoeuver.’ Words and language bear the traces of their previous consignments; they are marked, or ‘preconstrained,’ by a history of their previous occurrences. Simon himself insists on this history in language when he states that ‘the writer works on a material—language—laden with history.’ ‘Our vocabulary,’ he writes, ‘is not a set of inert signs—each word carries a weight that is at once historical, cultural, phonetic. (20)

Thus, we see yet again that myth and history are not diametrically opposed. On the contrary, mythic *bricolage* always involves engagement with historically resonant materials. It is simply a matter of assembling these materials in different (and therefore potentially liberating) ways. Its connection to materiality likewise allows *bricolage* to circumscribe the problems that Simon ascribes to philosophic abstraction.

*Bricolage* is a process of decontextualization and recontextualization. Familiar images and narratives are removed from their usual setting and reassembled in new and unique ways. This change in perspective is central to Simon’s project: he was drawn to the Russian formalist definition of the “fait littéraire” as “le transfert d’un objet de sa

\(^{166}\) « Oui, j’ai très souvent employé, en parlant de mon travail, le mot bricolage. Je le trouve très très bon. Ce n’est pas moi qui l’ai trouvé, je l’ai repris de Lévi-Strauss qui lui-même l’avait repris […] C’est un mot que je trouve très bon parce qu’il oppose justement une conception très artisanale du travail de l’écrivain à celle éternelle du génie, de l’inspiré. L’écrivain, en somme, c’est, du moins en ce qui me concerne, quelqu’un qui fabrique un objet, qui le fabrique difficilement » (qtd. Calle-Gruber, *Triptyques* 36).
zone de perception habituelle dans la sphère d’une autre perception” (Calle-Gruber, *Triptyques* 11). External changes (e.g., political ones) therefore begin with a change in perception. Like its visual analog, the collage (a genre in which Simon also participated), *bricolage* juxtaposes seemingly unrelated objects in novel, “illogical” ways. As he explains in his introduction to *Orion aveugle*, “les mots possèdent […] ce prodigieux pouvoir de rapprocher et de confronter ce qui, sans eux, resterait épar” (9). For Simon, this might involve the pairing of “important” and “unimportant” events, or the creation of textual collages from pieces of other novels. The works of Proust, Elie Faure, and George Orwell (to name but a few) all appear unexpectedly in the midst of Simon’s prose, often without quotation marks or other forms of attribution. This appropriation allows Simon to breathe new life into texts by framing them in entirely new ways. Faced with the impossibility of any “authentic” representation of human experience, *bricolage* becomes the most effective tool for remedying disorder: “For Simon, […] there is no theoretical solution to the perceived chaos of the world, and *bricolage* represents the only possible alternative strategy: a kind of muddling through, somehow or other assembling a representation of the real that is at least relatively more solid than the initial experience of it” (Britton, “Introduction” 16).

The key difference between the *bricoleur* and the engineer, both of whom assemble projects from preexisting materials, is that “the various means at the disposal of the *bricoleur*, unlike the engineer, cannot be defined in terms of a project” (Doubrovsky

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167 Some of Simon’s collages can actually be seen in a filmed interview Simon did for German television, now available on a DVD included with Calle-Gruber’s book *Triptyques*.
168 As described earlier in this chapter.
169 For a more thorough analysis of these intertextual elements, see Mary Orr, *Claude Simon: the intertextual dimension*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow French & German Publications, 1993.
The *bricoleur* does not decide ahead of time what he is creating; the emphasis is instead on process. Thus, when Simon states in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that he never had anything to say in the Sartrean sense, we can take him at his word. The process of assemblage takes precedence over any preconceived message. To cite again from *Orion aveugle*, Simon insists that “Avant que je me mette à tracer des signes sur le papier il n’y a rien, sauf un magma informe. […] C’est seulement en écrivant que quelque chose se produit” (7). Not only that, but it is a never-ending process of self-production. *Bricolage* has no telos; there is no steady perfection of the Hegelian spirit—hence the appeal for Simon.

The assemblages that result from *bricolage* are not intended as complete, contained, totalizing narratives that might replace the “false” narratives of nineteenth century realism. On the contrary, *bricolage* is more closely aligned with fragmentation, with dismantling the world into its primordial constituent parts. In her discussion of Simon’s *Le Vent*, Brewer insists that it “is not about restoring a unified (mythical) subtext; rather, it is about tracing the mythical in the text’s gaps and discontinuities. […] The reactivation of mythic fragments in Simon’s writing cannot be assigned to an archetypal Ur-narrative”(14, 19). Instead, myth diverts energy away from master narratives and “serves as an obstacle to mobilization by inventing a kind of writing that cannot immediately be recuperated by ideologies of totality” (Brewer 137). Though this sort of fragmentation might seem at odds with the aforementioned primordial unity that emerges from the dissolution of boundaries between self and other (or self and world), it is in fact through

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170 “*Bricolage* is by definition a never-ending process, as each new structure will in turn be dismantled and its components used to make yet another one” (Britton, “Introduction” 15).
fragmentation that we are able to overcome the limitations of individuated forms. In Lyotard’s reading, Simon’s work is characterized by the search for undetermined (i.e. unexpected) linkages among disparate elements, which for him have critical historical-political dimensions.\textsuperscript{171}

Simon’s use of fragmentation and bricolage when representing traumatic events (World War II, the Spanish Civil War, etc.) has often been explained merely as an expression of the ineffable chaos of tragedy, yet Simon offers a simpler explanation of fragmentation as our base state of being: « Nous sommes tous constitués des ruines : celles des civilisations passés, celles des événements de notre vie dont il ne subsiste dans notre mémoire que des fragments. » (\textit{Album d’un amateur} 18). However, these ruins are not meant to induce melancholy, but are ultimately even more majestic than the “originals” due to their status as survivors of destruction. Nor are they left in their ruined state; rather, they are gathered and reassembled into new cultural products.\textsuperscript{172} Janssens describes this as “une ontologie de la ruine” and concludes: “ruiner n’est pas appauvrir, c’est ‘ennoblir’” (33).

\textit{Abstract Realities and Concrete Myths}

Due to the \textit{nouveau roman’s} defiantly “anti-realist” position, as well as the common view of myth as opposed to “reality,” it is worth pausing to parse these terms and determine what “reality” and “realism” mean in the context of Simon’s literary

\textsuperscript{171} For more on this, see Lyotard, \textit{Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event} (1988).

\textsuperscript{172} « Les ruines sont des manifestations de la vie dans ce qu’elle a de plus robuste, et tout passé est une addition de ruines auxquelles le temps, les mutilations confèrent une majesté durable que l’édifice ainsi ennobli n’avait pas à l’état neuf » (\textit{Album 18}).

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output. Simon (perhaps surprisingly) self-identified as a realist, though his definition of the term was decidedly different than that of Balzac or other traditional realists. For Simon, reality is always experienced as fragmentation; thus, a fragmented narrative style is most accurately “realist”:

Et c’est à l’exemple de Flaubert et du cubisme qu’il explicite le principe du réalisme littéraire : ‘Tout ce que je peux saisir, non seulement de ma mémoire mais encore du monde qui m’entoure au présent, ce sont, comme Flaubert l’a bien senti, des fragments, un monde émietté, disloqué, et à ce titre on pourrait avancer au passage que les peintres qui ont donné l’équivalent le plus réaliste de notre perception du monde visuel sont les cubistes et en particulier Picasso, de l’époque dite ‘synthétique’, où dans leurs tableaux voisinent (ou plutôt pour rappeler encore Flaubert : se combinent) les fragments d’une guitare, d’un compotier, d’une manchette de journal, d’un paquet de tabac, etc.’ (Calle-Gruber, Inlassable 34)

It is clear that his notion of realism has little to do with fidelity, nor does he view fidelity and fictional invention as mutually exclusive concepts:

MCG : Y a-t-il, dans l’écriture qui se souvient, conflit entre une fidélité du témoignage et l’invention de la fiction ?


Indeed, Simon frequently bemoaned the fact that painters are permitted more leeway than writers in their use of non-realist techniques: while artists like Dubuffet, Tapies, and Rauschenberg (with whom Simon closely identified) are rarely accused of being “unengaged,” overly formalist, or devotees of art for art’s sake, despite their experimental styles, such labels are applied to Simon for creating what is arguably a literary analog to

173 In an interview in 1960, Simon called himself « un réaliste total » (Les Lettres francaises, 6 décembre 1960, p. 5). It is worth noting that Robbe-Grillet also claimed to be a realist—though again, in a manner that opposed traditional, historical understandings of the term.
their visual work. Viart attributes this contradiction to the sway that Sartre’s discourse held over the literary world (Mémoire 253).174

Similarly, while expressing an understanding of the psychoanalytic distinction between real and imaginary, Simon nonetheless concluded that the opposition was of little importance (with the terms ultimately bleeding into one another): « Certainement, ce que vous appelez l’inconscient joue un rôle mais je crois qu’il est important de cesser de faire une différence entre ce « réel » et cet « imaginaire » que nous distinguons tellement peu dans notre vie. Il me semble que ce que l’on appelle le réel ou l’imaginaire se mélangé, que tout ça est intimement entrecroisé, interpénétré » (Knapp 186). For Simon, the tension was not between real and imaginary, but rather between one reality and another (equally valid) one: « Ce qui est donné avec le monde tel qu’il est, ce n’est pas une totalité à déconstruire, puisque c’est d’une réalité déjà déconstruite que nous héritons : c’est une autre réalité à construire – à construire avec les moyens du bord, c’est-à-dire à partir des décombres de la première, et avec eux » (Dällenbach Claude Simon 115).

Yet another binary that Simon seeks to undo is that of abstract/concrete—in particular, the association of the former with myth, and the latter with realism. While

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174 Sartre was famously dismissive of the political power of painting, stating at the beginning of Qu’est-ce que la littérature: “Et Le Massacre de Guernica, ce chef-d'œuvre, croit-on qu’il ait gagné un seul cœur à la cause espagnole?” Simon has a very different take on Picasso’s masterpiece: “Mu par un sentiment d’indignation, prenant comme « point de départ » une réalité horrible (une ville bombardée, des corps sanglants et déchiquetés), Picasso peint un tableau où tout n’est qu’ordre, équilibre et beauté. Alors que son impulsion motrice était l’abomination, sitôt saisi les pinceaux, sitôt qu’il s’est confronté avec son langage, celui-ci s’est emparé de sa pensée au point qu’à la fin, elle n’a plus été qu’harmonie, architecture, réminiscences classiques. Picasso a-t-il pour cela « trahi » les morts de Guernica, les a-t-il « exploités », c’est-il mis au service (puisque son œuvre fait aujourd’hui l’ « ornement » d’un musée financé par des « exploitants ») d’une classe de privilégiés ? De tout temps les moralistes n’ont cessé de s’indigner et de stigmatiser ces activités où, apparemment, la morale ne trouve pas sa place” (Calle-Gruber, Triptyques 149).
common understandings of myth link it to fantasy, fable, and other forms of abstraction that must be stripped away in order to get at the reality behind it, it is actually (as Lévi-Strauss reminds us) a science of the concrete. That is, it is concerned with the material, the primal, with bodies and nature. According to definitions dating back as least as far as Schiller, myth facilitates a more direct access to “reality,” whereas “realist” discourses augment the gap between subject and object.175 Thus, by adhering to this mythic devotion to the concrete, Simon produces a style that Calle-Gruber has characterized as “un réalisme brutal. C’est l’homme réduit à son corps, à son sexe ; c’est la vie ramenée à ses gestes, à ses besoins primordiaux, toujours traversée par le drame, toujours vouée à la dégradation, à la souffrance, à la mort” (Triptyques 61). Viart coins the term “concrétude” to describe Simon’s methodology; in the wake of World War II, Simon advocated a return to concrete, material, primordial things, aligning himself with art brut painters like Dubuffet.176

Due to this commitment to “things,” Viart ultimately attributes to Simon « une véritable éthique de la matérialité », a « morale du corps » (“Sartre-Simon” 123). If books were powerless to impede the horrors of World War II (as the passage on the destruction of the Leipzig library in La Route des Flandres indicates), then the abstractions contained within them must be abandoned in favor of first principles (that is, materiality). And for Simon, materiality is best accessed not through a “realist” discourse, but through the

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175 In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche concludes that “Schiller is right about these origins of tragic art, too: the chorus is a living wall against the assaults of reality because it—the satyr chorus—represents existence more truthfully, really, and completely than the man of culture does who ordinarily considers himself as the only reality. The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world as a fantastic impossibility spawned by a poet’s brain: it desires to be just the opposite, the unvarnished expression of the truth, and must precisely for that reason discard the mendacious finery of that alleged reality of the man of culture” (61).

176 See Une mémoire inquiète, p. 253.
avant-garde. In a 1958 essay, he defined the avant-garde as the search for precision, exactitude, « une fidélité minutieuse », thus dismantling the notion that fidelity and aesthetic experimentation are opposed. This precision is what he strived to accomplish in his own art after escaping from captivity: “On my return, after I escaped, I went back to painting but above all I worked on drawing. I copied leaves, a tuft of grass, a pebble, as exactly as possible. Somewhat in the spirit of Durer’s drawings which I discovered later. I had banished from my mind all idea of art. No more cubism, no more fantasy, nothing. Just things” (Alphant 54). Paul Dirkx et Pascal Mougin claim that Simon’s “réalisme extrême” stems from “une poétique toujours plus scrupuleusement vouée à transmuer en langage littéraire, contre l’inertie doxique de la langue et malgré le fait qu’il ‘n’y a pas d’art réaliste’, certains fragments de réalité sociohistorique que l’écrivain a plus ou moins enregistrés en certains lieux et à certains moments de son existence, qu’il sait inexorablement inscrite dans cette même réalité » (18). Poetic (or mythic) language is ultimately better able to reflect reality than traditional realist discourses.

Even if Simon is not a mythographer in the manner of Lévi-Strauss or even Roland Barthes, his temporal and spatial manipulation, his use of bricolage as an organizing principle, his rejection of rational humanism, and his focus on the concrete all converge to form a mythic logic that governs his literary output. The question then remains: how does this mythic style relate to the concept of political commitment (of both the Sartrean and non-Sartrean variety)?

In Search of a Middle Term: Sartre, Socialist Realism, and the Role of the Writer

Simon critics have shown little interest in the question of his political engagement. For years, formal criticism, focused on techniques like word play and Faulknerian stream-of-consciousness, prevailed. At a moment when Sartre’s battle cry of littérature engagée was dominating the French intellectual landscape, the nouveaux romanciers were systematically excising history, politics, and other sociological themes from their works. Though he was just as devoted to experimentation with language and a rejection of traditional realism as his fellow nouveaux romanciers, Simon’s books nonetheless contain far more specific historical references than those of his counterparts. If Robbe-Grillet omits character names, place names, chronological indications, and other markers that might allow for a precise socio-historical reading of his novels, Simon explicitly refers to events of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, thus rendering him more easily recuperable as an “engaged” writer (or at least, engaged with identifiable people, places, and things). When Simon was asked what distinguished his voice from those of the other new novelists, he responded: “Beginning with The Grass, my novels are more and more based on my life and require very little fiction—in the end, really none at all” (Paris Review). Yet despite his more obvious alliance with contemporary historical events, accusations of disengagement abounded.

Reading Simon as apolitical is not without justification. Despite his frequent inclusion of true historical and political events in his novels, Simon nonetheless insists that his writing is always produced in the moment of writing—it is never a description of
that which has come before. Nathalie Piégay-Gros underscores the de-historicized, archaic misery in Simon’s work as proof of his disengagement from History. Other critics have pointed to a prevailing pessimism in his fiction at odds with the revolutionary thrust toward progress. Patrick Rebollar, who set out to complete a systematic analysis of political language in Simon’s novels, is forced to conclude that Simon rarely employs a “political” vocabulary; characters do not discuss their political choices or ideologies; they almost never engaged in direct political action; even Simon’s soldiers are not politically motivated. One could therefore be forgiven for concluding that Simon is indeed unengaged, particularly when viewed alongside more politically vocal figures like Sartre, Camus, and Louis Aragon. Nonetheless, I aim to show that Simon is indeed a “committed” writer, even if his commitment follows a different trajectory than that of more prominently political figures of the postwar era. In fact, he insists on the superiority of his anti-humanism over the empty promises of political parties: « par un extraordinaire renversement, cet antihumanisme est plus tonique que l’humanisme et ses larmes de

178 “Et, tout de suite, un premier constat: c'est que l'on n'écrir (ou ne décrit) jamais quelque chose qui s'est passé avant le travail d'écrire, mais bien ce qui se produit (et cela dans tous les sens du terme) au cours de ce travail, au présent de celui-ci, et résulte, non pas du conflit entre le très vague projet initial et la langue, mais au contraire d'une symbiose entre les deux qui fait, du moins chez moi, que le résultat est infiniment plus riche que l'intention.” From his Nobel Prize speech.


180 « La plus évidente, à mon avis, est que le vocabulaire politique n’est pas ou très peu employé par Claude Simon dans le cadre d’une action romanesque. Il n’y a pas d’organisation de personnages des romans qui serait narrativement élaborée sur des choix politiques, avec propositions, discussions, décisions, actions, réactions, changements, etc., comme on peut le voir chez des contemporains comme Gide, dans Les Faux-Monnayeurs, ou Sartre, dans Les Chemins de la liberté. Ainsi, lorsqu’on voit des personnages discuter en employant des arguments politiques, dans Le Tricheur ou dans La Route des Flandres, il s’agit moins d’arguments politiques visant à convaincre l’autre et à envisager une transformation sociale par l’action politique, comme ce serait le cas chez Balzac, Zola ou Jules Vallès, que d’apostrophes ou d’invectives opposant des positions définitives et inamovibles. En ce sens, il n’y a donc jamais d’intrigue politique chez Claude Simon, sauf peut-être dans Orion aveugle et Les Corps conducteurs où un réel suspense existe relativement aux motions discutées et adoptées en réunion… » (Rebollar 125-26)
crocodile, que la SDN et ses promesses mirifiques, que l’ONU et son cynisme effarant »
(210-11).

In applying the moniker “engaged” to Simon, I do not intend to place him in
Sartre’s camp. On the contrary, the two thinkers exchanged biting critiques on more than
one occasion. In one interview, Sartre dismissed Simon as a mere imitator of Proust
(Louette 63). Simon, in turn, in an interview for The Paris Review, unapologetically
declared, “I consider the writings of Camus and Sartre to be absolutely worthless.
Sartre’s work is, above all else, dishonest and malevolent.” Britton insists that, despite
sharing similar political views, the nouveaux romanciers were almost as antagonistic to
littérature engagée as they were to realism (Nouveau Roman 12). In response to Sartre’s
famous comment on the inadequacy of literature in the face of a starving child, Simon
accused Sartre of misunderstanding the purpose of literature (which is not to solve world
hunger) and used his own experiences as a starving prisoner of war as counter evidence
to Sartre’s claims, describing his insatiable craving for books in the midst of his corporeal
hunger (Louette 67).181 Ultimately, he concludes that engagement is at odds with liberty:
« On voit donc que l’engagement est la conséquence d’une inaptitude à saisir la liberté,
d’une volonté de s’abriter contre le doute; et non la forme concrète de la liberté, comme
le voulait Sartre » (77). He likewise objects to the heroic mythology surrounding the
notion of engagement (a very different kind of mythology than that which characterizes
Simon’s writing) (Viart, “Sartre-Simon” 120). If one is truly devoted to offering freedom
to all men, Sartrean engagement is not, according to Simon, the best path.

181 “En face d’un enfant qui meurt de faim, La Nausée ne fait pas le poids.” Cited in Les Ecrits de Sartre,
Simon objected just as fervently to socialist realism, and for many of the same reasons: its instrumentalization of language, its replacement of “reality” with ideology, etc. In fact, Simon viewed socialist realism as just as much a threat as traditional, bourgeois realism insofar as it “inhibits the process of social change because it reinforces the formal stereotypes of narrative order” (Britton, *Nouveau Roman* 27). For Simon, socialist realism is ultimately reactionary rather than progressive. Like its Balzacian counterpart, it is guilty of the totalizing impulse that Simon finds untenable in a postwar landscape. Simon proves himself unwilling to subordinate his art to externally imposed political aims: “social revolution and revolutionary art (i.e., innovative, experimental art) are actually antagonistic to one another. The Revolution has to subordinate everything to the one overriding aim of the liberation of the proletariat, whereas the artist, even if he is fully committed, *qua* citizen, to the aims of the revolution, cannot allow his work as an artist to be subordinated to *any* external aim or directive” (Britton, *Nouveau Roman* 14).

A key example of the sort of committed writing that Simon finds indefensible is George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, several passages of which appear in *Les Géorgiques*. Simon mocks Orwell’s attempts to produce a “credible,” “authentic,” and “neutral” account of the Spanish Civil War, describing on numerous occasions the mendacious steps that Orwell takes to produce his so-called true version of events:

> pour mieux convaincre, il s’efforce (feint ?) de se borner aux faits (par la suite seulement il tentera d’en donner un commentaire), étayant son récit de juste ce qu’il faut d’images pour que celui-ci n’ait pas la sécheresse d’un simple compte rendu, lui conférant plus de persuasion, de crédibilité, par plusieurs notations de

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182 Britton argues that this is also Barthes’s position: “Barthes’s original claim that socialist realism was as reactionary as the most reactionary texts of bourgeois realism broadens into a general condemnation of realism *per se*. Any *representation*al text—any text, that is, which asks to be read as a representation of reality—is now seen as complicit with bourgeois ideology” (*Nouveau Roman* 86).
ces détails, de ces ‘ choses vues’ dont tout bon journaliste sait qu’elles constituent les meilleurs certificats d’authenticité d’un reportage, d’autant qu’elles d’ insèrent dans une forme d’écriture qui se présente comme neutre (il recourt à des phrases courtes, il évite dans la mesure du possible les adjectifs de valeur et d’une façon générale tout ce qui pourrait ressembler à une interprétation partisane ou tendancieuse des événements, comme s’il n’ y avait pas été étroitement mêlé mais en avait été un témoin sans passion, seulement soucieux d’information). En fait, il est constamment préoccupé de l’effet produit. Assis là à sa table, ce sera comme s’il parlait tout haut dans le silence… (309)183

Simon’s lack of regard for the mandates governing political writers is likewise made apparent in his farcical introduction to Leçon de choses:


He goes on to question the privileging of certain themes as more properly political than others: « Est-ce que le travail manuel, par exemple, la journée de deux maçons, ou une promenade d’amoureux, ne sont pas aussi importants qu’un épisode de guerre ? » (Calle-Gruber, Triptyques 164).184 Thus, it is clear that any political commitment on Simon’s part will not follow mainstream programs.

Concomitant with Simon’s loss of faith in rational humanism came a loss of faith in many forms of political participation. The events to which he bore witness in Spain led him to view the Communist revolution as a naïve dream: “The most woeful ingredients of

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183 Simon goes on to facetiously compare Orwell’s style to “ces auteurs qui se divertissent à plonger le lecteur dans la confusion en attribuant plusieurs noms au même personnage ou inversement” (335), an obvious reference to the practices of the nouveaux romanciers.

184 This statement bears some resemblance to Bataille’s claim that, « Le monde des amants n’est pas moins vrai que celui de la politique » (OC I: 532). See Chapter Two.
the Spanish civil war were its selfish motives, the hidden ambitions it served, the emphasis on hollow words used by both sides; it seemed to be a comedy—terribly bloody—but a comedy all the same” (*Paris Review*). His experiences as cannon fodder during World War II only reinforced these feelings of political pessimism. Simon was skeptical of the individual’s capacity to intervene in global historical events, and especially skeptical of the artist’s ability to oversee such interventions. At a colloquium in Vienna in 1967, he declared definitively: “Il convient de mettre fin à une légende: jamais aucune œuvre d’art, aucune œuvre littéraire n’a eu, dans l’immédiat, un poids quelconque sur le cours de l’Histoire.” Britton insists that “Simon is sarcastic about man’s arrogant belief that he can intervene in the historical process – or indeed, the comforting belief that history is intelligible, because rational and hence susceptible of moral justification, or that progress is possible” (*Writing the Visible* 144). She goes on to point out the uneasy reaction of critics on the left to this nihilistic attitude, and their “tendency to minimize his cynicism or to explain it away” (144). I nonetheless maintain that he is not so much nihilistic as skeptical of certain forms of political intervention. Simon was wholly in sympathy with the anti-Stalinist shift among the postwar intelligentsia. “But whereas the dominant response was to build up a ‘new left’ outside the Party, he saw this as futile. To him […] the formation of a new non-Stalinist socialist movement could only be yet another dangerously illusory and self-congratulatory attempt to achieve the impossible: that is, to make history” (Britton, “Introduction” 3-4). Simon

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185 For the full text of Simon’s intervention, see *Les Triptyques de Claude Simon*, ed. Mireille Calle-Gruber, 157-61.
186 It is perhaps worth noting that the Nobel Prize committee, in their press release justifying their choice of Simon, also located a hopeful thread in his work: “something hopeful, in spite of all cruelty and absurdity which for that matter seem to characterize our condition and which is so perceptively, penetratively and abundantly reproduced in his novels.”
wholeheartedly rejects this notion of “making history” in the epigraph to *L’Herbe* (a quotation from Boris Pasternak): “Personne ne fait l’histoire, on ne la voit pas, pas plus qu’on ne voit l’herbe pousser.” And yet, I would argue that man’s inability to make history is not equivalent to pure fatalism. If we are unable to *make* history (that is, direct sweeping movements that will lead to “progress”), we nonetheless retain the potential to intervene in small yet vital ways. For, as Simon himself insists: « au sein de l’immense et incessante gestation du monde, et dans l’ensemble des activités de l’esprit, toute production de celui-ci, à condition d’apporter quelque chose de neuf, joue son rôle, le plus souvent de façon invisible, souterraine, *mais cependant capitale* » (Calle-Grube, *Triptyques* 158-59, italics mine). I argue that the mythic mood of Simon’s novels provides some semblance of comfort, order, connection, and repair in the midst of what Viart calls “la catastrophe de toute référence” (*Mémoire* 215).

Raymond Jean was one of the first critics to attempt a political rehabilitation of Simon (and of the other *nouveaux romanciers*). At the Cerisy colloquium in 1971, he delivered a piece titled “Politique et ‘Nouveau Roman’” in which he referred to *Le Palace* as “la plus politique des œuvres du « nouveau roman »” (364) and systematically listed the many references to revolution in the *nouveau roman*. Discussing both Simon and Estelle Faye, he concluded that « ils « citent » (je donnerai volontiers à ce mot le sens qu’il prend en tauromachie), chacun à sa manière, la réalité politique de leur temps, considérée non pas comme un ornement ou un épiphénomène, mais comme une des parties les plus *actives* du discours que le monde tient devant eux » (366). He sees the

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187 Lucien Goldmann had initially penned a political reading of the *nouveau roman* in *Marxisme et Sciences humaines* but later recanted that position.
*nouveau roman* as engaged in the subversion, negation, and/or reversal of bourgeois values. While Jean Ricardou insisted on the irremediable opposition of the political and literary orders, Raymond Jean viewed this opposition as an over-reaction to the twin threats of socialist realism and Sartrean engagement and ultimately concluded that these movements need not result in an all-out rejection of politically inflected literature. While he conceded that the *nouveau roman* is not *absolutely* political, he likewise pointed to the absurdity of *absolutely* denying its political potential. Viart is likewise able to make inroads into Simon’s rehabilitation as a politically motivated writer by identifying three separate spheres of Simonian engagement: 1) his engagement as a citizen (for example, by signing the “Manifeste des 121 insoumis”); 2) his critique of other forms of engagement (including socialist realism); and 3) engagement through form, such that his literary experimentation produces political resonances (*Mémoire* 235). Though the first two categories do not necessarily bear on his literary output, I remain invested in the third, wherein a seemingly apolitical formalism results in oblique yet irrefutable political interventions.

If Simon resisted traditional political action, he nonetheless viewed writing itself as a form of engagement, an active “doing,” rather than a passive “being.” In his Nobel Prize speech, he cites Paul Valéry on this subject: « si l’on s’inquiète (comme il arrive, et parfois assez vivement) de ce que j’ai voulu dire (...), je réponds que je n’ai pas voulu dire mais *voulu faire* et que c’est cette intention de *faire* qui a *voulu* ce que j’ai *dit* ». Calle-Gruber goes so far as to claim that this “doing” has revolutionary potential: « tout roman est […] révolutionnaire. Que ce ne sont pas les (grandes) idées qui révolutionnent mais le faire artisan qui dessine, chaque fois unique, le trajet d’une révolution » (*Inlassable* 28).
Though Simon refused to position art and literature as principal movers in political upheaval, he nonetheless acknowledged their interrelatedness: «Kandinsky en Russie, les cubistes en France précèdent de quelques années la grande révolution bolchevique. Il serait évidemment absurde de prétendre que les premiers sont des artisans de la seconde : il serait tout aussi risible de soutenir que peinture abstraite, cubisme et Révolution d’Octobre sont des phénomènes sans aucune espèce de liens entre eux» (Calle-Gruber, Triptyques 158). Simon insists that aesthetic revolutions have their role to play, as well as political ones, even if the political side seems to take precedence, and at times even set itself in opposition to aesthetic change.

*From Experimentation to Engagement*

«Chaque fois que le monde est dit de façon un peu différente (que ce soit par la science ou les arts) il se transforme.»
—Claude Simon

If Simon opposes both socialist realism and littérature engagée, what form of engagement, if any, is left to him? Retreating into a purely aesthetic realm as a remedy against historical deficiencies is not an adequate solution, as David Carroll demonstrates:

Along with their repeated critique of History (most frequently found in Simon’s work with a capital ‘H’), and more specifically of the coherent, continuous, progressive form of History found in history books, Simon’s novels also reject essentialist, aesthetic recuperations of the loss of historical transcendence and meaning. In general, Simon refuses to situate his work as a novelist within a post-romantic literary tradition that proposes to supplement the deficiencies of historical knowledge and representation by means of the creative or aesthetic imagination. (“Thinking” 29)
As early as 1936, Walter Benjamin warned that the aestheticization of violence risked ushering in war (a prophecy that proved all too true). Myth, however, does not attempt to transcend tragedy through aesthetics. Simon approaches the violence of his generation through a mythic mode as a means of acknowledging the insufficiencies of grand historical narratives, but without merely replacing one totalizing tale with another.

Instead, he deploys his particular brand of literary experimentation, related to the *nouveau roman* and yet also distinct from it, as a scaled-down, non-ideological form of political intervention.

Britton, in discussing the *nouveau roman* at large, claims that, “Conscious experimentation with literary form is *in itself* a kind of political ‘engagement’” (*Nouveau Roman* 26). If so, then the dichotomy of *nouveau roman/littérature engagée* is a false one. Roland Barthes actually sought to dismantle the opposition between the two groups:

Barthes himself saw no contradiction between his definition of ‘engagement’ and the writing of the Nouveau Roman; when in an interview in 1964 he is asked why, with his view of writing as commitment, he approves of ‘uncommitted’ writers such as Robbe-Grillet and Butor, he replies: ‘ces écrivains eux-mêmes vous ont répondu souvent qu’ils ne se considéraient nullement comme étrangers ou indifférents à leur temps, à l’histoire des hommes parmi lesquelles ils vivent. Entre l’histoire et l’œuvre, il y a de nombreux relais, à commencer précisément par l’écriture. (*Britton, Nouveau Roman* 28)

Britton concludes that the antipathy between Sartre and the *nouveaux romanciers* was tied less to their political values than to their respective attitudes toward language: “What made Sartre’s idea of literature impossible for the Nouveau Roman to accept was not so much the importance he attached to political reality as the definition of *language* that followed from it” (*Nouveau Roman* 103).

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188 “[T]he logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life…All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war” (*Selected Writings* v. 3, 121).
Jean Ricardou, who long dominated Simon criticism, makes the provocative claim that it is because modern literature does not obey the rules of socialist realism or Sartrean engagement that it can have a true engagement with politics, rather than being a mere ideological illustration. In his eyes, both socialist realism and Sartrean engagement become, paradoxically, myths (in the negative, propagandistic sense of the word), whereas the mythical mode of cognition that emerges in the experimental language of modern literature is better able to evade heavy-handed political grandstanding. Thus, it is the transformation of linguistic structures that will ultimately lead to social transformation.

For the *nouveaux romanciers*, grappling with language is its own form of engagement, as Robbe-Grillet insisted in *Pour un nouveau roman*:

Redonnons donc à la notion d’engagement le seul sens qu’elle peut avoir pour nous. Au lieu d’être de nature politique, l’engagement c’est, pour l’écrivain, la pleine conscience des problèmes actuels de son propre langage, la conviction de leur extrême importance, la volonté de les résoudre de l’intérieur. C’est là, pour lui, la seule chance de demeurer un artiste et, sans doute aussi, par voie de conséquence obscure et lointaine, de servir un jour à quelque chose – peut-être même à la révolution. (47)

Unsurprisingly, this transformation of language necessitated new forms. Simon had already begun experimenting with form in the wake of World War II as a means of grappling with the tension between the (false) order of language and the disorder of the world: “From that experience of chaos springs the suspicion of all ordered forms of writing, the invention of new forms from the exploded fragments of experience and myths, and the uncanny melancholy of memory searching for points of reference and rest in an unstable world” (Duffy 8). It is necessary to reiterate, however, that this

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[See his comments from the 1971 Cerisy conference in *Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd’hui*, v. 1, 1972.]
engagement with new forms is not an abandonment of old forms, but rather a restructuring of those forms, the creation of new assemblages from the detritus of the old, which allows Simon to remain situated within history even while critiquing it. As Simon insisted, “The role (the function) of the artist seems to me to be to participate in and partake of History (in other words, to be in and of this incessant transformation of the world) by producing new forms” (Birn 286). Simon’s experimentation is not art for art’s sake, empty formalism, or passive nihilism.\textsuperscript{190} It is a dynamic engagement with form.

What, then, do these new forms look like, and what do they offer over and above the ones they are rejecting? First and foremost, they attempt a compromise between previously dichotomous terms—between history and literature\textsuperscript{191} (or history and writing more generally),\textsuperscript{192} between the avant-garde and tradition,\textsuperscript{193} between order and disorder.\textsuperscript{194} Their efficacy stems from their ability to unite seemingly disparate elements.\textsuperscript{195} Simon was attracted to language’s ability to assemble seemingly incompatible objects; by turning away from representation, Simon was able to highlight other potentialities within language. Though this practice does not aspire to any ultimate

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\item \textsuperscript{190} « D’une part, Simon ne prône pas un nihilisme passif : sa pratique artistique est un acte positif ; d’autre part, son formalisme n’est pas un art pour l’art. S’il a pu proclamer n’avoir rien à dire, il écrit pourtant quelque chose » (Yapaudjian-Labat 108-09). This final statement refers to Simon’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he claimed to have never had anything to say in the Sartrean sense.
\item \textsuperscript{191} Johan Faerber claims that “Simon voudrait alors trouver un moyen terme entre littérature et histoire, un troisième terme d’où surgirait l’écriture qui se ferait hors des livres et qui dirait l’histoire des hommes…” (85)
\item \textsuperscript{192} Britton speaks of the “prominent and conflictual juxtaposition of history and writing” (\textit{Writing the Visible} 161).
\item \textsuperscript{193} “Il n’est ni d’avant-garde ni de tradition; il a opté pour la ‘tradition de nouveau’ qui est la seule tradition en art, selon le mot d’Harold Rosenberg qu’il cite. Ce qui implique des domaines de travail toujours ‘en crise’, ‘en révolution permanente’” (Calle-Gruber, \textit{Inlassable} 11).
\item \textsuperscript{194} Simon was fond of quoting Valéry: “Deux dangers ne cessent de menacer le monde: l’ordre et le désordre.”
\item \textsuperscript{195} See his introduction to \textit{Orion aveugle}.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
transcendence of fragmentation (fragmentation being our natural and irreparable state), it nonetheless retains the ability to reorder the fragments in politically potent ways.

The disparate elements that Simon brings together are often culled from “traditional” discourses: Latin grammar exercises, history textbooks, newspapers, the writings of Julius Caesar, Ovid, Proust, George Orwell, etc. Indeed, Simon argues that all subversion must take tradition as its starting point:

La tradition est, au contraire, dynamique. Nous existons et nous créons en fonction de la tradition qui nous a formés et dont nos actions découlent, même – et peut-être surtout – lorsqu’elles prétendent le nier. Comme on l’a très bien dit : pour qu’il soit possible de dessiner des moustaches sacrilèges à la Joconde, il fallait qu’auparavant elle ait été peinte. Il est à cet égard significatif que les dadaïstes qui recommandaient de brûler les musées n’aient pas été des paysans ou des ouvriers illettrés mais au contraire des jeunes gens issus de milieux bourgeois et possédant une vaste culture. (qtd in Calle-Gruber, Triptyques 157)

For Simon, an all-out rejection of bourgeois ideology is less politically effective than assemblages created from repurposed pieces of that ideology. By employing a language that resists fixed forms, Simon’s texts remain dynamic, constantly shifting, re-writing themselves and thereby evading closure within externally imposed ideologies. His frequent use of expressions like “ou plutôt… ou plutôt” or “c’est-à-dire… c’est-à-dire,” as well as his questioning of his own word choices, demonstrates his opposition to the type of reified ideas being promulgated along official political channels.196

This experimental style based on bricolage is likewise effective in recuperating marginalized stories, those excluded from traditional narratives. Even when addressing well-documented events like the Spanish Civil War or World War II, his focus is on peripheral details and characters. It is not the generals or heroes who concern him, but

196 In Les Géorgiques, for example, Simon calls into question the stability of meaning by offering alternate word choices: “s’efforce (feint?)” (309).
rather the pitiful idiots led to slaughter, the cuckolded husbands, the inscrutable old men
drinking at nondescript cafes, the women glimpsed only momentarily behind a curtain. It is not that Simon is uninterested in history; on the contrary, it is a constant
preoccupation. However, he is dissatisfied with existing historical discourses and, as
Johan Faerber claims, seeks a middle term between literature and history that would give
a voice to those excluded from official History: « dans ce présent infini d’après le
désastre, Simon cherche en fait des histoires, presque immobiles, sous le regard, des
histoires à pente faible, à savoir l’histoire des hommes quelconques perdus dans
l’histoire, une histoire des hommes sans histoire, une histoires où, sous ‘les vestiges d’un
langage incohérent’ comme il est encore dans Histoire, on retrouverait l’homme » (85).

For all of his interest in fragmentation and the subversion of fixed forms, Simon
nonetheless remains invested in formal structure. In an interview with Calle-Gruber, he
describes his consternation upon hearing a fellow writer describe the purpose of his
profession as the creation of anarchy: « J’ai, non sans stupeur, entendu à New York, lors
d’un congrès, Mario Vargas Llosa déclarer que la fonction de l’écrivain était de créer
l’anarchie. Or, c’est exactement le contraire, écrire consistant à apporter un ordre, des
priorités … d’établir une hiérarchie » (Inlassable 77). His obsession with rhythm reveals
a stable structure undergirding his seemingly chaotic prose. One need only look at the

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197 Simon often speaks of the irremediable disconnect between History (that which is inscribed in books) and the experiences of individuals. The narrator of Histoire laments the fact that his actions in Spain feel so far removed from what he imagined revolution to be—removed, that is, from grand historical change. A similar sentiment is described in Les Géorgiques: « il lui semblait de moins en moins probable qu’il participât à une action historique : en tout case, si action il y avait, elle apparaissait sous une forme, bruyante certes et tapageuse, de non-action, à moins d’admettre (ce qui était après tout possible mais peu exaltant) que l’Histoire se manifeste (s’accomplit) par l’accumulation de faits insignifiants, sinon dérisoires, tels que ceux qu’il récapitula plus tard… » (299-300)
198 The clash between “official” historical discourse and the stories of marginalized figures is also central to my reading of Elsa Morante in the next chapter.
manuscript for *La Route des Flandres* to be convinced of the highly ordered nature of his projects. While outlining the novel, he assigned a different color to each character and carefully mapped out the order of their appearances and the number of pages dedicated to each, such that the recurrence of each motif was properly spaced out, in the manner of a musical score. It is Simon’s ability to carefully navigate the realms of both order and disorder that renders his novels so compelling. For, as Valéry wrote, “Deux dangers ne cessent de menacer le monde: l’ordre et le désordre.”

**Vertical Repetition and the Escape from Destiny**

In response to Dällenbach’s question (“une littérature d’après-guerre est-elle possible?”), Simon develops « un engagement dans une forme privilégiant cela seul qui reste, le primordial » (primordial being more or less synonymous with mythic) (Yapaudjian-Labat 108). Patrick Rebollar in turn characterizes Simon’s method of engagement as « une vision transhistorique de la politique involontaire de l’espèce humaine, beaucoup plus organique qu’intellectuelle » (130). As previously mentioned, Simon turned to myth due to his loss of faith in rational humanism, a reaction to the trauma of World War II (among other things). Myth proved an attractive alternative due to its investment in fragmentation and *bricolage*, its resistance to totalizing narratives and ossified bourgeois values, and its capacity to creatively re-imagine history. Furthermore, for Simon, myth was a means of overcoming tragedy, of reactivating common cultural frameworks in order to rebuild fractured communities. Finally, myth’s simplicity makes it ideal for a return to fundamentals, to things, to the concrete, material world, all of which Simon viewed as the only means of continuing in the wake of World War II. The
primordial brings some sense of order to an otherwise chaotic existence. However, I
would like to conclude by expanding on the importance of mythic repetition for his
project.

Simon’s repetitions (a key aspect of his mythic methodology) do not imprison us
in endless cycles of violence, as some critics have claimed, but are paradoxically
liberating insofar as they are repetition with a difference. Brewer points to a sort of
“catastrophic repetition,” or traumatic repetition, in Simon’s work, yet trauma implies
imprisonment in a retroactive (and therefore inevitably fruitless) effort to prepare for
catastrophe. If Simon returns again and again to the same episodes—the failure of the
Spanish Revolution, or the annihilation of the cavalrymen at the Battle of the Meuse—he
nonetheless presents the scenes with slight variations each time. Though the events
themselves may not change, the contexts, and the connections that Simon draws to other
events, do. Melina Balcázar Moreno dubs this practice “vertical repetition,” of the sort
described by Gilles Deleuze in Différence et répétition.

Il y a, pour Claude Simon, comme pour le philosophe [Deleuze], une répétition
qui sauve et une répétition qui enchaîne : « Si la répétition nous rend malades,
écrit encore Deleuze, c’est elle aussi qui nous guérit ; si elle nous enchaîne et nous
détruit, c’est elle encore qui nous libère, témoignant dans les deux cas de sa
puissance ‘démoniaque’. » La répétition devient dans ce roman une force
transgressive qui donne à Simon l’occasion de sauver les événements du passé et
peut-être de trouver, grâce à l’écriture, son propre salut. (99)

199 See Narrativities Without Narrative, p. 88.
200 Moreno explains: « Tout au long de son œuvre, l’écrivain a cherché une nouvelle technique d’écriture
capable d’articuler, à chaque fois d’une manière nouvelle, inouïe, les événements pour les libérer. Mais ce
travail d’écriture pourrait sembler paradoxal : comment libérer les événements en les soumettant à la
répétition, celle des cycles de la nature, celle de la révolution ? C’est peut-être cette « passion »,
profondément liée à la vie et au désir, qui le dirige vers la répétition. Celle-ci n’apparaît pas dans sa forme
négative, « celle des mots ordinaires qu’on redit » par défaut. La répétition dont il est question chez Claude
Simon est cette « répétition verticale », identifiée par Gilles Deleuze, celle « des points remarquables » qui
porte le sens des mots redits à la « nième » puissance » (99).
Repetition in the form of eternal recurrence is undoubtedly linked to fate, inevitability, and therefore despair. Yet Simon’s attitude toward repetition has more in common with Deleuze than with Nietzsche. Indeed, he associates history, not myth, with the vicissitudes of fate. To ignore the cycles of violence throughout history would be naïve or even mendacious, yet an acknowledgement of repetition need not end in a paralyzed political position. In fact, Carroll insists on the distinction between Simonian repetition and eternal return: “the form and sense of history in Simon’s novels is [...] repetitive and not cyclical, the return of difference rather than identity” (Subject 139).

An examination of the baroque elements in Simon may help to further explicate the particularities of his repetition. As Wolfram Nitsch explains: “Le mouvement du baroque, c’est la spirale. C’est-à-dire le retour de la même ligne, sur la même génératrice, mais avec à chaque fois un décalage de niveau” (48, italics mine). Thus, to reiterate, Simon’s repetition is not identical, but rather creates a gap that can be mobilized toward political ends. According to this formulation, there is room for change within repetition; there is room, that is, to insert the contingent (and the political) into an otherwise timeless unchanging landscape. For Britton, this is “repetition as aggressive or playful transformation” rather than “the repressive, deadening dictation/dictatorship of fixed repetition” (Introduction 122). The differences are therefore critical, rendering repetition dynamic, malleable, and applicable to political aims.

201 « Et il était en train de s’y employer quand l’Histoire (ou le destin – ou quoi d’autre ? l’interne logique de la matière ? ses implacables mécanismes ?) en décide autrement » (Géorgiques 347).
202 Michel Deguy identifies Simon’s political position precisely as paralysed, a conclusion I find overly hasty. “One understands that Claude Simon’s political position – a paralysed position that is in fact more common than you might think – is likely to be uncomfortable, also that it is bound to have enemies on all sides: being neither ‘on the right’ given its demystification (as they say) and cynicism, nor ‘on the left’, since it is not in any way progressive” (75).
It may also be useful to consider the role of repetition in ritual (a phenomenon closely linked to myth) to decipher why Simon posited repetition as dynamic rather than tragic. The purpose of ritual is to repeat some originary event (such as the separation of the cosmos or the founding of a city). Each iteration of the ritual superimposes itself onto all other iterations, taking us back to a prehistorical, or nonhistorical, moment. For Roger Cailllois, ritual (or the festival) is a return to cosmic time as a means of rejuvenating or repairing our world, which is subject to the vicissitudes of time. In this sense, repetition is both desirable and necessary. By symbolically returning to a state before forms became reified, ritual displays reparative potential.

For all of Simon’s objections to abstraction, philosophy, and humanist thought, he nonetheless remained invested in writing—and more specifically, in writing as a form of political commitment. His prose rejects traditional, realist models of narration and representation in favor of an experimental, formalist model in which narrative is produced in the moment of writing and remains inexorably linked to the materiality of language. The interventions that Simon proposes as a remedy for the oppressive weight of destiny almost always take the form of writing, and these acts of writing are in turn dramatized in his novels (Histoire; La Route des Flandres; Les Géorgiques). Though one of the soldiers in Les Géorgiques bemoans the inability of literature to serve as a guide to the horrors in which he is embroiled, this should again be read as a critique of a specific kind of literature, rather than an outright dismissal of the value of writing (and

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203 Margaret Mead, for example, defines ritual as “the repetition of those symbols which evoke the feeling of that primordial event which initially called the community into being with such power that affects our presence at that event – in other words, represents the primordial event.” (1972, p. 127)

204 This link to ritual is not merely incidental; one of the titles Simon considered for La Route des Flandres was Carnaval, which, in his notes, he accompanies with the following definition: “Littré: Temps où l’on enlève l’usage de la chair. Fonds Simon, SMN Ms 5, p. 463.
Indeed, words are the only phenomenon capable of bridging the isolation inaugurated by catastrophe. His ancestor’s notebooks, though worthy of scorn in some regards, also create a bridge between two epochs, foregrounding common experiences across generations. For “ce qui est souvent sans rapports immédiate dans le temps des horloges ou l’espace mesurable peut se trouver rassemblée et ordonné au sein du langage dans une étroite contiguïté” (Orion aveugle 9-10).

Simon’s approach to the history and politics of postwar France, though certainly unconventional, nonetheless struck a chord with many readers. Christophe Honoré writes: “j’ai l’impression qu’il prend en charge l’expérience de la guerre vécue par tous ces écrivains, même s’ils ont eu des expériences différentes » (261), thus lending a certain universality to his partially autobiographical texts. Régis Debray echoes this image of Simon as representative of an entire generation grappling with the war and its attendant disappointments and tragedies:

Je crois que l’œuvre de Claude Simon, même si elle n’a pas été tout de suite appréciée ou comprise (il y a quelques propos cruels à son encontre), est un véritable microcosme du siècle : la déconstruction de l’Histoire, la perte du sens, la perte de la finalité, le déroutement de l’ancien sens de l’Histoire et la primauté du signe sur la chose, ces tendances et ces problématiques ont traversé tout son siècle. (34)

205 « Toutefois aucun des auteurs sélectionnés par Penguin ne s’était apparentement soucié d’écrire un ouvrage (il devait pourtant exister) traitant de cette sorte de situation et qui lui eut permis d’affronter le problème qui se posait, c’est-à-dire de comprendre le pourquoi de ce qu’il était en train de faire là, assis jour après nuit et nuit après jour… » (297)

206 In “Fiction mot à mot,” Simon posits a certain kind of metaphor as an approximation of prelapsarian unity: « le langage ne distingue pas non plus entre ce que l’on appelle le « réel » et l’ « imaginaire » […] il m’a donc semblé que supprimer le mot comme, c’est-à-dire, en somme concretiser en quelque sorte la métaphore, c’était peut-être, d’une certaine façon – sans doute illusoire, mais que faire ? – se rapprocher de cet Éden dont il nous sépare » (91).

207 The notebooks are primarily objectionable because of his ancestor’s unmitigated love of Rousseau and his naïve lists of commercial transactions, of horses bought and sold, all of which proved meaningless in the face of political upheaval.
It is for this reason (among others) that the Nobel committee saw fit to bestow the prize on Claude Simon, locating a hopeful thread amidst the horrors he presented: “Against these grim descriptions are contrasting elements of another kind - of tenderness and loyalty, of devotion to work and duty, to heritage and traditions and solidarity with dead and living kinsmen.”
Chapter Four
“Once Upon a Time There Was an S.S.”:
Politics from Inside the Fairy Tale Chamber

When Elsa Morante’s novel La Storia was published in 1974, no one could have anticipated the firestorm of criticism that would consume the Italian literary community for the next three years. Einaudi had circulated a few advance copies, and the reviews were almost uniformly positive; Natalia Ginzburg, a famed novelist in her own right, was practically euphoric in her endorsement of the work. However, approximately three weeks after the book’s release, a scathing letter appeared in the popular Communist newspaper Il Manifesto, dismissing Morante as a “scrittrice mediocre” who displayed the “ostentata mistica della rassegnazione.” The letter was so vicious that the editor printed an apology. Other condemnations soon followed—Rossana Rossanda, for example, lamented that, “vender patate è meglio che vender disperazione”—and by the end of the year, almost every newspaper, regardless of its political affiliation, was involved in the debate. The avalanche of reactions became so complicated that whole articles were devoted to simply summarizing prior critiques in order to get readers up to speed. Morante was front-page news.

The obvious question is: why did La Storia elicit such incensed reactions? Much of the answer is tied to the political climate in Italy at the time. The early 1970s marked the peak of political optimism and advancement among the Italian left. Gregory Lucente writes that in such an environment, “An acknowledgement of social and political

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engagement became […] a prerequisite for any public utterance or gesture” (“Scrivere” 230). Furthermore, among so-called “committed” writers, experimental, non-representational art was considered the most appropriate vehicle for social change.

Though La Storia is hardly representational in the vein of nineteenth-century bourgeois novels, it does draw on classic, representational strategies, which did little to endear Morante to her more revolutionary peers. Furthermore, the philosophical foundation of the novel savors more of Christian mysticism and utopian poetics than Marxism, a decidedly unorthodox position for an intellectual of that period.

Clocking in at an intimidating 665 pages, La Storia is difficult to summarize. The novel traces the lives of Ida Ramundo, a naïve Jewish schoolteacher, and her children from the years 1941-1947. Ida is raped by a German soldier and bears his child, a strange, quasi-mystical boy named Useppe who prefers the company of animals to that of people and who suffers from unnamed maladies. Her other son, Nino, is a wild yet joyful adolescent whose shifting political alliances—from Fascist to partisan to black market war profiteer—reflect the fuzzy political boundaries of the era. Ida survives the constant threat of deportation, the Allied bombing of Rome, and a wide array of deprivations, only to lose both children in rapid succession shortly after the liberation. Overcome with despair, she slips into a catatonic state and lives out her days in a sanatorium.

Structurally, the novel alternates between didactic, textbook-style introductions to each section, which coldly list the dates for various political events and their corresponding
statistics, and the personal tale of Ida, peppered with transcriptions of children’s songs and excerpts from popular folk culture.\(^{210}\)

Focusing on plot might lead one to believe that *La Storia* is a grim, realist reflection on wartime Italy; but while grim themes certainly abound, the novel is ultimately more utopian than dystopian, and has more in common with myths and fairy tales than the Holocaust memoirs of Bruno Piazza or Primo Levi. Though Morante takes as her starting point the realities of World War II, she lends an air of enchantment to an otherwise bleak, war-torn landscape with her clever inclusion of lullabies, nursery rhymes, dragons, gnomes, genies, and magical eggs, to cite just a few examples. Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose negative review of *La Storia* cost him his friendship with Morante, accused her of retreating to a fairy tale chamber, and thus failing to confront real political problems.\(^{211}\) However, I contend that the enchanted elements do not detract from the gravity of the historical backdrop or ignore the sociopolitical exigencies of postwar Italy. Rather, enchantment emerges as a new form of political engagement, created in response to the failure of other revolutionary practices. This chapter will explore the ways in which Morante’s unique amalgamation of myth and politics collides with the utopian poetics of figures like Ernst Bloch and Simone Weil and offers an alternative to the definitions of committed literature that prevailed in 1970s Italy. Morante insists that reason alone cannot achieve revolutionary change; poetry and imagination are equally (if not more) important for stirring men and women to action. Grappling with the distinction between

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\(^{210}\) One example of this textbook approach to history reads: “Gennaio-Febbraio 1943: l’Armata Rossa libera Leningrado. Il numero dei cittadini morti durante l’assedio è di 630 mila” (141).

\(^{211}\) The expression "la camera delle favole" (a fairy-tale chamber) was used by Pasolini in a conference presentation entitled "E.M." read in Aci in 1972.
merely representing history and actually changing it—between writing and doing—she ultimately concluded that they are one and the same, with “true” poetry assuming a material, worldly power.

**Who’s Afraid of Elsa Morante?**

Reading Morante’s biography, there are few indications that she would dominate the Italian press so thoroughly in the mid-1970s. Born on August 18, 1912 in Rome, Morante, like the protagonist of *La Storia*, was the daughter of a Jewish schoolteacher. She began writing at a very young age, though her first book-length collection wasn’t released until 1941. That same year, she married novelist Alberto Moravia, and the two were active in many of the leading literary and political circles in Rome. When World War II broke out, Morante and Moravia fled the city, fearing the repercussions of their Jewish heritage. Their experiences in Southern Italy during the war feature prominently in both authors’ subsequent works, including Morante’s *La Storia* and Moravia’s *La Ciociara*.

Following the war, Morante published a series of successful novels, including *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948), recipient of the Viareggio Prize, and *L’isola di Arturo* (1957), for which she became the first woman to win the Strega Prize. Morante and Moravia separated in 1961, but she continued to write sporadically, publishing *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini*, a poetry collection, in 1968, and *La Storia* in 1974. Her final novel, *Aracoeli*, was published in 1982, three years before her death, and was awarded the *Prix Médicis étranger*. 
Though her novels sold well (better, in fact, than her husband’s), and though she accumulated a number of literary prizes, she was by no means the leading writer of the day, and she never really achieved international renown.\textsuperscript{212} In fact, Morante faded into semi-obscurity during the last decades of the twentieth century and remains under-read today. Granted, there has been some renewal of scholarly interest in her work in recent years.\textsuperscript{213} In 2012, a new collection of her letters was published, and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, conservators of her manuscripts, held exhibitions about her work in 2006 and 2012. Nonetheless, the furious reactions to \textit{La Storia} seem odd when viewed from a 21\textsuperscript{st}-century perspective. In fact, \textit{La Storia} might have passed by without remark if not for the particular convergence of literary and political concerns that defined Italy in the 1970s—concerns that can be traced back to World War II, but that also reflect the new threats of the postwar era.

\textit{History and Herstory}

One of the most common critiques of \textit{La Storia} targeted her use of “child-like” genres—fairy tales, fantasy, and myth, among others—which were viewed as frivolous or irresponsible. However, as with the other authors considered in this project, it is not simply the presence of mythic tropes that made Morante an object of antipathy. Instead, it was the superimposition of myth onto an otherwise “realistic” portrayal of a painful

\textsuperscript{212} In a \textit{New York Times} story from 2008, Alan Riding writes, “Twenty-three years after her death, she is still remembered in Italy, but elsewhere in Europe, and certainly in the United States, she is known — if at all — as Alberto Moravia’s wife.”

\textsuperscript{213} Specifically, there has been an uptick in English-language Morante scholarship in the past decade. See, for example, \textit{Elsa Morante’s Politics of Writing: Rethinking Subjectivity, History, and the Power of Art}, ed. Stefania Lucamante (2015). Lily Tuck also published an English-language biography of Morante in 2008.
period in Italian history. Furthermore, her decision to focalize large-scale tragedies not only through a mythic lens, but also through the lens of a perfectly ordinary woman, was shocking to critics. Granted, many wartime tales feature an everyday individual rising to extraordinary heights due to the pressures of her time. However, even the most devoted fans of La Storia would surely agree that Ida is, by all accounts, an unremarkable woman. She’s not particularly intelligent, nor exceptionally beautiful; she does her job well, but she’s hardly Robin Williams in Dead Poets’ Society; her suffering evokes empathy, yet she suffers less than many in that same era. As the narrator relates, she belongs neither to the rich nor the poor, but to “una terza specie. È una specie che esiste (forse, in via di estinzione?) e passa, né se ne dà notizia, se non a volte, eventualmente, nella cronaca nera” (481). Why, then, did Morante create this figure to stand in for an entire nation’s tragedy?

I maintain that Ida’s ordinariness is precisely the point. Ultimately, the novel is remarkable less for its plot (which, though moving, is fairly conventional in tone) as for the ways in which Morante undermines conventional, patriarchal understandings of History by privileging the personal over the historical, women and children over men, the poor over the wealthy, and oral traditions over written ones. This anti-historical stance put her at odds with self-proclaimed “committed writers,” who, as Marxist critics, relied on a

214 The title of this chapter, for example, is an excerpt from a fairy tale that Davide, the tortured young anarchist of the novel, recounts to Useppe. In the story, he recalls his own experience brutally kicking a young German soldier to death, albeit through the framework of fairy tale tropes and vocabulary. See La Storia, p. 604.
215 See Schindler’s List (1993), Defiance (2008), and The Zookeeper’s Wife (2017), among others.
216 “D’intelligenza, era mediocre; ma fu una scolara docile, e diligente nello studio, e non ripeté mai una classe” (21). When Ida first appears in the novel, she is described as a “donna d’apparenza dimessa ma civile” (20).
217 “È ovvio che il suo insegnamento non era mai stato un modello d’avanguardia!” (475)
218 Because she is only part Jewish, she manages to avoid deportation when the ghetto is emptied.
more didactic form of historical materialism. Morante instead turns to the so-called “primitive” folk culture of rural Italy as a means of rehabilitating a sense of the sacred in the midst of a corrupt modernity.  

Morante begins her version of the war not with the violence of battles, but with a rape. It’s an intimate form of violence—violence against women, rather than men. This move forces readers to immediately reorient their understanding of the war and their expectations of its representation. If Morante’s goal was to dismantle the patriarchal and oppressive structures of History, then her protagonist had to be a woman. Not only a woman, but also a Jew; a single mother; a rape victim; a sufferer of epilepsy; a superstitious and perpetually frightened individual. La Storia was meant to give a voice to all the marginalized figures who were not being served by existing political organizations (not even by the most well-meaning Communists). And this political goal in turn explains her proclivity for myth: for Morante, women, children, the uneducated, etc. are more in touch with nature; they experience the world in a visceral or affective manner, rather than rationally. They are thus better served by myth (which likewise privileges affect over reason) than by the kinds of political discourses circulating at the time, including avant-garde poetry and highly theoretical Marxism. Myth was familiar, and thus a means of discussing politics with poor or illiterate citizens in a language they would understand (La Storia’s dedication reads: “Por el analfabeto a quien

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219 This interest in folk culture links Morante to such figures as Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Carlo Levi who all shared an investment in the mythology and mysticism that continued to govern life in rural Italy (particularly in the South) even after the explosion of post-war capitalism.

220 By the 1970s, it was clear that the PCI was inordinately invested in industrial workers and students, to the detriment of other disenfranchised groups. Thus, far-left organizations like Lotta Continua began to consider the possibility that women, the unemployed, and other marginalized figures (rather than the “mass worker”) might comprise the “real proletariat.” For more on this, see Jan-Werner Müller, “The Paradoxes of Post-War Italian Political Thought.”
escribo”). Ernesto de Martino’s ethnographic work has shown that mysticism and magic retained a powerful hold over many Italians well into the 1970s, especially in rural Italy. Morante viewed this as an untapped vein of political potential.221

However, in Italy, perhaps even more than in France, politics and myth were considered poor bedfellows. Thus, in order to understand the intensity of the reactions to La Storia, it is first necessary to flesh out the political and literary landscapes of Italy in 1974. To current readers, the novel may come across as unremarkable. Yet viewed in context, I argue that it is an anticonformist masterpiece.

**The Lead Years**

Like most European nations, Italy grappled with the ideal relationship between art and politics in the postwar period: in the 1940s, disagreements centered on Zhdavonism; in the ‘50s, it was neorealism versus literary decadence. By 1974, however—the year of La Storia’s publication—the tide had turned in favor of “experimental writing, drawing from French writers like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Sollers, and Italo Calvino and their experience of the Oulipo” (D’Angeli 189). Some of the best-known examples of this experimentation came from Gruppo 63, an avant-garde literary movement founded in October 1963 in Palermo. Though members were not guided by any clear formula (they never published a manifesto), Gruppo 63 defined itself in opposition to traditional literary models, most notably neorealism, and showed a strong predilection for Marxism, structuralism, and militant social commitment. For Nanni Balestrini, one of Gruppo 63’s founding members, modern meant experimental, and experimental meant non-

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221 For more on de Martino’s ethnographic research in Southern Italy, see chapter 1.

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representational. This literary experimentalism was in turn aligned with social
committment. For them, changing the system of linguistic signs was a prerequisite to
changing the system of organization and power in society. Representational literature was
therefore seen as the repetition of an undesirable past rather than a catalyst for change.
Despite their literary contributions, the members of Gruppo 63 were perhaps best known
for their public denunciations of well-established and beloved Italian writers, including
Carlo Cassola, Giorgio Bassani, Vasco Pratolini, and, of course, Elsa Morante, who they
dismissed as bourgeois and decorous.

1974 was also a tumultuous year for Italian politics. The Christian Democrat
party, rocked by a series of scandals, was waning in power, while the election of Enrico
Berlinguer as secretary of the Italian Communist Party took the Communists back to the
center of Italian politics after years in the wings. Against all expectations, a referendum
on divorce succeeded by a wide margin, thus igniting optimism for a secular and
progressive Italy. At the same time, the OPEC oil crisis essentially destroyed the Italian
economy in 1974, marking the beginning of a decade of stagnation and mass
unemployment. That year is also firmly entrenched in the era of rising terrorism,
exemplified most notably by the Brigate Rosse (who, in 1978, assassinated Prime
Minister Aldo Moro). These were the anni di piombo, or Years of Lead; between 1969
and 1981, nearly 2,000 murders were attributed to political violence in the form of
bombings, assassinations, and street warfare between rival militant factions. Given the
unique convergence of political optimism and violence during this period, it is all the
more surprising (and, for many readers, disappointing) that Morante chose to set La
Storia in an earlier epoch. In the eyes of many critics, this signaled a refusal to engage
with the urgent political issues of the day and reminded readers of a shameful past they would have preferred to ignore. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Russell Davies declared: “the time is past for wallowing in the seductive anarchy of the war years” (qtd. Traldi 246). In the end, Morante was too “pessimistic” and “depressing” for an Italian left riding on the surge of political optimism.

**Peddling Despair**

The attack against *La Storia* was led by three main fronts: those who favored experimental writing; a Marxist contingent, devoted to the notion of “committed” literature; and critics who no longer believed in aesthetic expression and regarded books as expendable merchandise (Berardinella 32). The latter group labeled Morante’s novel a “bestseller” in the worst sense of the word (that is, as populist drivel). Indeed, all three categories of Morante’s opponents decried the “unscrupulous” editorial practices that contributed to *La Storia’s* financial success—namely, Einaudi’s efforts to “hype” the novel years in advance by mounting extensive advertising campaigns.

In terms of generic classification, *La Storia* was received as a realist (or neorealist) novel by many readers. Such a structure may have fared well in the 1950s alongside works like Calvino’s *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, but as previously mentioned, both the political and literary climates had shifted in the intervening decades, such that, by 1974, neorealism was considered woefully outdated. Georg Lukács probably didn’t do Morante any favors when he dubbed her one of Europe’s foremost contemporary
realists. However, Stefania Lucamante insists that critics at the time misunderstood Morante’s incorporation of neorealist styles and themes; rather than being an anachronistic move, she claims that, “Morante indeed resumed Neorealist forms, but only to deconstruct them into a web of narratives bearing her own distinctive mark. […] La Storia adopts the novel genre in order to overthrow its presuppositions and to elicit how Neorealism (and all the –isms) are insufficient to describe the complexities of the world” (Forging 156-57). La Storia was not the first of her works to be accused of realism (and thus anachronism); following the publication of her first novel, Menzogna e sortilegio, “Morante was frequently accused, in a spirit of partisan and superficial criticism, of anachronism, of writing a great nineteenth-century novel when there were more pressing concerns in the re-establishment of the nation and of a national culture” (Lucamante and Wood 3). De Luca explains that the “anachronistic pathos and popular melodramatic effects” of the novel placed it in closer proximity to “nineteenth-century feuilleton than to the ideologically charged works of that highly politicized period” (175). In some cases, she was even condemned by the very size of her novel, long, winding narratives having gone out of fashion. Among his other critiques, Balestrini famously declared: “Allora, compagni: oltre che dai decretoni, cominciamo a difenderci anche dai romanzi.”

The ideological critiques were the most common, and the most scathing. As

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222 In her early review of the novel, Natalia Ginzburg likewise compared Morante to Dostoevsky: “non riuscivo a vedere nessuna differenza apprezzabile fra ‘La storia’ e ‘I fratelli Karamazov.’” Respected as Dostoevsky was, committed writers of the period were uninterested in repeating nineteenth-century realism.
223 Morante herself was rather critical of neorealism. Bérard describes how the unfinished novel draft of Senza i conforti della religione “depicts the failure of neorealism and of an engagé movie project about the Bikini nuclear tests; and finally, articulates the conflict between commercial ambitions and ethical and political motivations” (“Senza” 141-2).
Sharon Wood explains, “One of the many criticisms leveled against Morante’s *La Storia* was its failure to align itself with an identifiable political left, its perceived refusal to engage directly and openly in the struggle against contemporary capitalist structures of power in the late 1960s and 1970s that sought to exploit the working class in the pursuit of profit” (‘Excurses’ 75). In fact, because she failed to openly condemn capitalism, Morante was even accused of aiding the enemy’s cause; Balestrini yet again weighed in to declare, “A noi ‘La Storia’ non sembra altro che una scontata rassegnazione, un nuovo discorso delle beatitudini, che l’ideologia della classe sfruttatrice trova del tutto funzionale al proprio attuale progetto economico.” Her representation of marginalized workers was received as a “sanctification of poverty and destitution” (‘Excurses’ 75).

Critiques of Morante’s ideology can be further subdivided. One group comprises critics who felt she lacked any sort of political commitment. As previously mentioned, the novel was frequently dismissed as pessimistic, and pessimism in turn was equated with a refusal to engage with the political. The other group contains those who acknowledged that *La Storia* contained political themes, but who disapproved of the particular politics to which Morante was committed. Lucente writes, “There was no doubt that Morante's novel was ‘engaged,’ that it was the fruit of a storyteller who was not only extremely resourceful but also avidly committed. But therein lay the problem: committed to what?” (‘Scrivere’ 238) Responses varied, ranging from Christian utopianism, to

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anarchism, to the victory of the innocent of the earth, to the post-Historical reign of poetry itself (238).

Of course, not all of the reviews were negative—particularly if we expand our time frame. In addition to the praise she received preceding the novel’s official release (which some dismissed as mere “hype”), Cesare Garboli writes in the introduction to the 1995 re-publication of *La Storia*: “Ricordavo un romanzo indignato, ribelle, polemico, ideologico. Non un romanzo ma, come diceva la stessa Morante, un manifesto, un’azione politica. La sconsacrazione, la condanna della Storia. […] La Storia ne usciva come un romanzo di ribellione sessantottesca, di protesta” (vii-viii). Garboli is particularly committed to rescuing Morante from the accusations of political disengagement, underscoring the protest interwoven with a seemingly sentimental and outdated story. Sinibaldi goes so far as to argue that the “lack of ideology” in her work—the absence of a reassuring vision of the world—makes Morante *more* radical and more honest than her political counterparts.225

The third strand of opposition involved the perils of popularity. Balestrini was one of several critics to denounce *La Storia* as a *romanzone* (a populist, consumerist work). Though Morante and her defenders argued that these critics, as part of the intellectual elite, simply failed to understand a novel geared toward the masses, Lucente calls this claim into question: it was common, he tells us, “to argue either for or against a Gramscian assessment of the novel as a *romanzo popolare*. […] What sense does the term

225 “Essere senza ideologia, privarsi di una compiuta e rassicurante visione del mondo non è meno ma è *di più* (più radicale, più estremista ma anche più vero, più fedele al compito di verità che lo scrittore – il poeta, per usare la parola adatta per la Morante – deve proporsi, ma che non dovrebbe essere estraneo a nessuno, tantomeno al politico)” (217-18).
‘popular’ have if the novel is in fact both narrated from and geared to a perspective that,
far from being ‘popular’ in Gramsci’s sense, is in fact thoroughly middle-class,
commercially ‘acceptable’ (i.e. highly marketable) and, in its very language, culturally
and intellectually elitist?” (“Scrivere” 238) It is difficult to know how to respond to this
“bestseller” critique; on the one hand, she was lampooned for failing to address the
political priorities of average Italians; on the other, she was condemned precisely because
so many average Italians bought her book (it sold over 600,000 copies, an unheard of
number at a time when the Italian publishing industry was struggling). As Lucamante
tells us, “critics’ overreactions […] did not stain La Storia’s positive reception by the
general public” (Forging 156). What is perhaps most intriguing (and most frustrating) are
the contradictions among the negative reviews. Everyone disliked her for a different
reason: some claimed she was too much of a realist, others that she was too mystical or
fantastical; some accused her of being out-of-touch with the times, while others said she
played too much to popular tastes; some denounced her consolatory tone, others her
pessimism.

It should be clear by now that much of the criticism leveled against La Storia had
more to do with the rigidly dualistic political thinking that dominated the intellectual
landscape in 1970s Italy than with the content or style of the novel. As Flavia Cartoni
observes, “At the time of the publication of La Storia, I believe that much of the criticism
raised was primarily by those who believed fervently in the validity of the two different
economic systems of the time: communism and liberalism. Nowadays, given the defeat of
these two systems that once upheld, divided, subdivided, and dominated the world, we
can see beyond those criticisms” (244). From our current vantage point, we can see the
shortcomings of judging all art according to such narrow labels. And in fact, the failure of this binary was precisely what Morante sought to underscore with her novels. If critics viewed Morante as politically naïve or behind the times, she in turn viewed much leftist thinking as ineffective and out-of-touch with the masses. Thus, she didn’t hesitate to defend *La Storia* by turning the critiques back against the left.

**Morante Strikes Back**

Around 1970, Morante began work on an essay titled “Piccolo Manifesto dei Comunisti (senza classe né partito),” composed of thirteen points in which she voices a spirited critique of the state of the left at that time. In the very first line, she declares that, “Un mostro percorre il mondo: la falsa rivoluzione,” and goes on to define this false revolution as one based on violence or power. Indeed, one of Morante’s main objections to the leading political groups of the day involved their use of violence to effect social change. She was a firm pacifist who opposed all violence, even in the name of freedom or equality. “For Morante […] all human action must respect life. A revolution that uses violence in order to achieve its goals is false and can only lead to the establishment of a totalitarian society. For these reasons, Morante rejects both the ideology and the actions of the 1968 Italian protest movements, and, a decade later, the violent campaigns of the Red Brigades” (Karagoz 258). Given the push toward radical action during the 1970s, pacifism was a minority position, to say the least.

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226 She went so far as to draft a letter in 1978 condemning the Red Brigades, though she never sent it. It was published posthumously in 1988.
Second, Morante did not believe in the revolutionary force of avant-garde aesthetics. “Morante had long understood instead that ‘esoteric forms of writing had by then lost any transgressive charge’ and realized how a different kind of historical novel was needed to describe the world in its historical changes” (Lucamante, Forging 158). She was dismissive of the nouveau roman, littérature du regard, and other forms of literary experimentation, condemning in particular those writers who strived to appear “modern” at all costs.\textsuperscript{227} Though experimental forms may have been inspiring for a small number of intellectuals, they failed to resonate with the working class, women, children, and other marginalized groups that Morante hoped to target with her novel.\textsuperscript{228} Morante felt that, though the left claimed to speak for the common worker, it ultimately failed to reflect the beliefs and desires of its constituency, employing a language out-of-sync with individuals only recently thrust into modernity. Here, Ernst Bloch’s notion of nonsynchronism is illuminating; as Jack Zipes explains, “Bloch emphasized the failure of left movements to recognize the huge gaps that modern technology and industrial change had created in people’s lives. He maintained that ‘progress’ brought about disorientation, especially for the agrarian and petit-bourgeois classes, and that the longing for bygone days, for the old ways of life, for solid traditions, was a direct result of this disorientation and not simply reactionary” (xviii). This was particularly true in postwar Italy, where rapid industrialization and commercialization, combined with the trauma of the war, had led to intense feelings of alienation. Leftist intellectuals derided the superstition and

\textsuperscript{227} “Un’altra caratteristica certa, che distingue i mediocri e falsi romanzi, è le preoccupazione—la intenzione programmatica—di apparire ai propri contemporanei, a qualsiasi costo, ‘nuovi,’ ‘moderni,’ ‘all’avanguardia,’ ecc. […] Il vero romanziere non si preoccupa, né tanto meno si impone per programma, di apparire nuovo e moderno: eppure, lo è sempre” (\textit{Pro o contro} 60).

\textsuperscript{228} As previously mentioned, she dedicated \textit{La Storia} to the illiterate.
nostalgia of the working class, unwilling to acknowledge the need for familiar traditions in the wake of tremendous upheaval. It was these traditions that Morante sought to resurrect in her work—though, as I will later explain, not in order to wallow in empty nostalgia, but in order to adapt elements of the past to the postwar environment.

Morante also recognized a serious gap in the official World War II narrative being circulated in the postwar period—a narrative that, like in France, valorized the Resistance while largely ignoring Italy’s role in the Holocaust. As Lucamante explains, “Too many Italians were intellectually monopolized by the narrative of Italian communism and Resistance and neglected their responsibilities toward the Italian Jewish community” (Forging 159). In the struggle to topple capitalism, the tragedy of deportation became a blind spot in the national consciousness. La Storia addresses this blind spot explicitly; when describing the Jews returning to Rome from the camps, the narrator explains:

Presto essi impararono che nessuno voleva ascoltare i loro racconti […] Difatti i racconti dei giudii non somigliavano a quelli dei capitani di nave, o di Ulisse l’eroe di ritorno alla sua reggia. Erano figure spettrali come i numeri negative, al di sotto di ogni veduta natural, e impossibili perfino alla commune simpatia. La gente voleva rimuoverli dale proprie giorante come dale famiglie normali si rimuove la presenza dei pazzi, o dei morti. (377)

It was this kind of amnesia that led Morante to resist the dominant political trends of the day. For radical leftists, creating a new future meant abandoning the past, a position that Morante was uncomfortable adopting.

The leftist figures within La Storia also offer a great deal of insight into Morante’s opinion of youthful “revolutionaries.” Nino joins the Communists on a whim (having joined the Black Shirts for equally arbitrary reasons); for him, the party’s appeal is linked to his romanticization of the outlaw life. Ultimately, his political goals lie much closer to
those of capitalists (or gangsters). Speaking of the impending revolution, he declares, “E
famo un ponte aereo Hollywood-Parigi-Mosca! E ce sbronziamo de whisky e de vodka e
li tartufi e er caviale e le sigarette estere. E viaggiamo sulle Alfa da corsa e sul bimotore
personale. […] e famo l’orge co l’Americane e ce scopiamo le danesi, e ar nemico je
lassamo le seghe…” (214) Even Davide, who espouses a much more fully formed
anarchic philosophy, succumbs to drug addiction and despair, reduced to delivering
feverish rants in taverns full of workers more concerned with their card games than with
his theories about fascism. The futility of his revolutionary aims reflects Morante’s
skepticism of other young anarchists—though again, without rejecting politics outright.

In her 1959 essay “Sul romanzo,” Morante offers a direct response to the
countless accusations of political evasion:

E tanto più, dunque, suonano equivoche e stonate le voci de certi piccoli recensori
dei romanzi, i quali parlano arbitrariamente di impegno e di evasione,
dimostrando soltanto, coi loro poveri criterii, la loro deficienza critica e umana.
Essi evidentemente ignorano che un romanzo bello (e dunque, vero) è sempre il
risultato di un supremo impegno morale; e che un romanzo falso (e, dunque,
brutto) è sempre il risultato di una evasione dal primo e necessario impegno del
romanziere, che è la verità. (Pro o contro 48-9)

She goes on to turn the label “non impegno” against her accusers: “Supremi esempi di
non-realismo, di non-impegno, e di evasione, a me sembrano certi prodotti del realismo
socialista (così nominato), o del (così nominato) non-realismo contemporaneo” (50).

Furthermore, many of those judging the political commitments of other artists,
she claims, are themselves disingenuous adherents of their own political philosophies:

In compenso, si discute moltissimo, oggi, in Occidente e più ancora in Oriente,
dei compiti, dei doveri, della responsabilità degli scrittori!, e i propagandisti della
buona arte indicano perfino dei congressi internazionali su questo argomento. Ma
purtroppo, simili propagandisti, nella maggioranza dei casi, appartengono – in
Rather than obsessing over the question of commitment, Morante defines revolutionary art as anything that increases vitality: “Il fatto è che una vera opera d’arte […] è sempre rivoluzionaria: giacché provoca un aumento di vitalità, appunto. Per questo tutti i reazionari d’ogni partito preferiscono l’arte falsa, la quale non provoca altro che il benvenuto sonno della ragione” (Pro o contro 72).

In Italy (and elsewhere), the 1970s were a period of disenchantment (in the Weberian sense of the word). For committed writers, this was both necessary and good; disenchantment signaled freedom from dangerously naïve or utopian visions for the future. For Morante, however, disenchantment marked a loss of innocence and was therefore a source of modern ennui and despair. She objected to the overly mechanistic Marxism of these so-called committed writers and feared political revolution would lead to cultural amnesia, with cherished traditions abandoned in favor of “innovation.” Given these critiques of the left, then, what did she offer instead? What did she hope to accomplish with her “anachronistic” and “disengaged” novels?

**An Accusation against All Fascisms of the World**

In 1976, following censorship of *La Storia* in Spain, Morante explained her goals for the novel at a union-sponsored cultural conference in Rome: “Prima ancora che un’opera di poesia (e questo, per grazie di Dio, lo è!) il mio romanzo ‘La Storia’ vuol essere un atto d’accusa contro tutti i fascismi del mondo. E insieme una domanda urgente e disperata, che si rivolge a tutti, per un possibile risveglio commune” (“La censura”).
Thus, though she was accused of removing art from the political sphere, she in fact viewed the battle against fascism and the battle for poetry as inextricably linked. As Lucente explains, “Her book represents, for her, what Useppe had represented within her narrative, a worldly example of the force of poetry, of creative imagination at work in the world, and a key to the understanding and the salvation of human society gone wrong, which is to say, to the understanding of history and History” (Beautiful Fables 263). The problem with political ideologies (fascism and Communism alike) is that they anonymize individuals in favor of abstract historical theories. For Morante, any understanding of History writ large must begin with an understanding of the lowliest participants. Myth thus becomes a useful framework insofar as it affects dictators and peasants alike, granting equal weight to all sectors of society and thereby serving as a sort of equalizing force.

Garboli argues that one of the main appeals of La Storia was simply the fact that it offered something different; critics accused her of lazily imitating dusty historical novels, yet Morante in turn saw a troubling degree of conformity emerging in intellectual communities. As such, “La Storia era un romanzo controcorrente, d’ispirazione anarchica e di grande leggibilità…Per molti, moltissimi, lettori il romanzo si presentava come una liberazione da opinioni conformiste e costituite. Ma in alti ambienti, nell’establishment, quell’onda di consenti fu sentita come un pericolo” (Garboli, “Introduzione” ix). In short, leftist intellectuals sought to control public opinion and were upset that Morante had established a direct line of communication with readers, one that spoke to them in their language and encouraged them to think for themselves, instead of relying on intellectuals
to interpret the world and disseminate messages. Perhaps Morante already sensed the disillusionment and loss of momentum that would cripple the Communist party in the late ‘70s and therefore sought to create something more durable than momentary violence in the streets.

In the end, La Storia did intervene in key social, political, and cultural debates in the early and mid 1970s, “confronting head-on such topics as sociopolitical oppression and victimization, potentially non-Freudian, spontaneous love, and the relation between utopian anarchism, Marxism, and millennial Christianity” (Lucente, Beautiful Fables 261). However, she presented these themes in ways that required reader reflection and interpretation, rather than offering straightforward ideological positions, which proved confusing for the public of that time. Morante’s “strange mixture of representational responsibility, ironic withdrawal, and pathos” only served to further complicate her reception (261). Accused of being both too historical and not historical enough, realistic and mystical, pessimistic and naïve, Morante’s uniqueness lies in bridging these binaries: she imbeds myth and superstition within realist discourse; she plants seeds of utopian longing in pessimistic soil. And these acts, I argue, have undeniable political resonances. Breaking away from the party line in order to communicate directly with “uneducated” readers was, in many ways, a revolutionary act.

As Lucente explains, “That Morante’s overtly representational novel would be met with such extraordinary enthusiasm on the part of the great preponderance of the literary establishment as well as the public must have seemed to Balestrini and his group, therefore, not only an affront but also a threat, not so much a challenge to open combat as the victory cry of their opponents (and now successors)—and so, despite the reversal of the ages of those involved, their own death knell” (“Scrivere” 234). The idea of speaking to the masses—and particularly to excluded social groups—through folk wisdom or common sense resonates with Gramsci’s views on the role of the “organic” intellectual. Though critics were divided on whether or not La Storia qualified as a properly Gramscian text, it seems clear that Morante shared with Gramsci a resistance to the “traditional” intelligentsia.

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In her essay “Pro o contro la bomba atomica,” Morante identifies the atomic bomb as the natural expression and extension of contemporary society; faced with the alienation of modern existence, humans feel a hidden longing for disintegration. Her goal was simply to create a work that could combat that impulse. “For her, only art and poetry could prevent the self-destruction of mankind and its tragic and ultimate distintegration” (Bérard 146). And the particular form that her art assumed was a mythic one. Myth’s non-linear temporal structure allowed her to disrupt the flawed notion of history as progress; it provided a vehicle for readers to reconnect with communities and nature in the wake of national tragedy; and it offered an alternative to rigid political ideologies (on both the left and the right). Thus, in Morante’s hands, mythic discourse became decidedly political.

The Scandal of History

Given that the title of her best-known novel is La Storia, it is unsurprising that history—and therefore temporality—is a central concern for Morante. In Italian, of course, storia means both “history” and “story,” and this double meaning is explored at length in the novel, with Morante alternating between “historical” sections, which take a birds-eye view of events, much in the style of standardized textbooks, and the personal tale of Ida and her children. Critics agree that Morante ultimately privileges the personal over the more properly historical, and even uses the former to critique the latter: her goal

230 “La nostra bomba è il fiore, ossia l’espressione naturale della nostra società contemporanea, così come i dialoghi di Platone lo sono della città greca; il Colosseo, dei Romani imperiali; le Madonne di Raffaello, dell’Umanesimo italiano; le gondola, della nobiltà veneziano; la tarantella, di certe popolazioni rustiche meridionali; e i campi di sterminio, della cultura piccolo-borghese burocratica già infetta da una rabbia di suicidio atomico. […] l’umanità contemporanea prova la occulta tentazione di disintegrarsi” (Pro o contro 99).
is to reveal the inaccuracies, omissions, and fictions that plague “official” accounts of history. In particular, she populates her novel with the kinds of characters most likely to be overlooked by History: women, children, old men, prostitutes, Jews, wannabe revolutionaries, and even soldiers (who, though present in history books, are thoroughly anonymized). Thus, her efforts to disrupt linear temporality go hand-in-hand with her objection to the notion of History as progress—a definition of History that she rejects as oppressive, exclusionary, and a threat to humanity’s very existence. As Davide declares during one of his political diatribes, “tuta la Storia l’è una storia di fascismi piú o meno larvati” (566). As such, “History itself, or perhaps linear time, is itself the scandal” (Wood, “Excurses” 76). Though the novel is primarily focalized through Ida and her family, the relentless march of History continues long after they are crushed; the final “documentary” section of the novel relates events until 1967, with the last line ominously declaring: “…a la Storia continua…” (656). Thus, Morante’s political aims are to undermine, interrupt, or otherwise impede this historical thrust. And her method for doing so relies on a revisionary historiography “that is no longer oblivious to women’s experiences in history. Not only does fiction alter and integrate the existing record by recounting the alternative deeds of marginal figures, it also experiments with forms of representation that question the primacy of historical chronology as a linear succession of discrete, meaningful episodes” (Della Coletta 118).

Morante offered numerous alternatives to historical time: prehuman time, magmatic time, inverted time, suspended time, queer time, women’s time.

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231 Mussgnug 35.
232 Gragnolati 215.
messianic time,\textsuperscript{237} omni-time,\textsuperscript{238} animal time,\textsuperscript{239} sacred time\textsuperscript{240}—and, of course, mythic time.\textsuperscript{241} As Berardinella writes:

Il romanzo diventa una lotta contro il tempo: un andare a ritroso, un fermarne lo scorrere, una immobilizzazione spaziale dello scorrere del tempo. Come se il tempo, procedendo, si curvasse anche su se stesso, e il suo procedere lineare volgesse impercettibilmente in movimento circolare, in un movimento immobile. Storia, cronaca e biografia, per Elsa Morante [...] possono essere liberate dalla corrosione dell’Irrealtà solo se entrano in una temporalità diversa: quella del sogno, del mito, nella ciclicità di un mandala. (20)

By strategically deploying repetition, suspension, anachronism, and prophecy—the tools of myth—Morante is able to interrupt (if not altogether defeat) a model of History closely linked with fascism—though born long before that particular social system.\textsuperscript{242}

\textit{The Irreducible Vitality of Repetition}

As with Pavese, Bataille, and Simon, repetition assumes a variety of forms in Morante’s fiction: the deterministic repetition of history; generational repetition; the cycles of nature. But she also shares with these writers an investment in repetition with a difference. Circularity can either be a sign of tragic fate \textit{or} an indication of continuity

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{233} Gragnolati 205.
\bibitem{234} Gragnolati 215.
\bibitem{235} Gragnolati 209.
\bibitem{236} Della Coletta 137; Re 366.
\bibitem{237} Parussa 141.
\bibitem{238} Lucamante, Forging 165.
\bibitem{239} Garboli, “Introduzione” xv; D’Angeli 124.
\bibitem{240} Garrido 124; \textit{La Storia} 18.
\bibitem{241} Garrido 124; Della Coletta 138, 143.
\bibitem{242} In \textit{La Storia}, the character Davide goes on a long rant against History, in which he defines fascism as follows: “La parola \textit{fascismo} è di conio recente, ma corrisponde a un sistema sociale di decrepitudine preistorica, assolutamente rudimentale, e anzi meno evoluto di quello in uso fra gli antropoidi […] simile sistema si fonda infatti sulla sopraffazione degli indifsì (popoli o classi o individui) da parte di chi tiene i mezzi per esercitare la violenza. In realtà, fino dalle origini primitive, universalmente, e lungo tutto il corso della Storia umana, non sussiste altro sistema fuori di questo. Recentemente, si è dato il nome di \textit{fascismo} o \textit{nazismo} a certe sue eruzioni estreme d’ignominia, demenza e imbecillità, proprie della degenerazione borghese: però il sistema in quanto tale è in atto sempre e dovunque (sotto aspetti e nomi diversi, e magari contrari…) \textit{sēmpar e departūt} dall’inissio della Storia umana” (565-66).
\end{thebibliography}
with ancestors and cultural precedents. Repetition with a difference allows Morante to reinvent history in the present. As Lucamante and Wood insist, “The circularity of the work is not, to use a psychiatric terminology, compulsive repetition. By definition, compulsion condemns the subject to death and Morante’s work manifests an irreducible vitality” (13). Indeed, for Morante, the circularity of memory is productive (and thereby disruptive).\textsuperscript{243} Morante privileges cyclicity as a more “natural” state of affairs, characterizing the linearity of human history as an irreparable rupture from our intended state of being. Lucamante goes so far as to associate this rupture with “evil”: “Life without history is an idyll between nature and human beings. When history breaks the cyclical and natural relationships that ensure continuity to human beings, evil unfolds in all its destructive force because the individual has lost her conscience” (Forging 179-80).

To understand Morante’s investment in circular notions of time, it is useful to introduce Julia Kristeva’s concept of “women’s time.” Despite its name, women’s time is not defined by gender; instead, it is a temporality that relates anything traditionally suppressed from historical representation.\textsuperscript{244} It is also fundamentally opposed to the time of history: “History is exclusively conceptualized in terms of linear time, ‘time as project, teleology, departure, progression and arrival.’ Kristeva relates linear time to the time of language in its ordered, syntagmatic sequence of words” (Della Coletta 137). Women’s

\textsuperscript{243} “For Morante, memory has a dimension which disrupts temporality and dislodges the certainty of progressive time which moves smoothly from A to B. Memory is not a matter of extension but an image of enclosure, entrapment, and circularity. In her notion of time, nothing passes and nothing is forgotten. To experience time is to experience pain, and the conscious recollecting mind is inevitably a suffering one. It is memory which gives a sense of identity, of continuity through time” (Wood, “Bewitched” 319).

\textsuperscript{244} “Expressing these notions of time means accessing the archaic or mythical memories and the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences ‘left mute by culture in the past.’ In this sense, the notion of ‘women’s time’ is less a matter of gender than a method—accessible to both women and men—of relating to what is traditionally suppression from common conceptualization and, consequently, historical representation” (Della Coletta 138).
time, on the contrary, comprises the cyclical time of repetition and the monumental
dimension of eternity—and as demonstrated in previous chapters, repetition and eternity
are likewise hallmarks of mythic temporality.\textsuperscript{245}

At times, repetition emerges through Morante’s use of historical analogy; the Nazi
occupation of Rome, for example, is described as a plague of old. Just as Pavese
superimposed Fascist violence onto more ancient rituals in \textit{La Luna e i falò}, so too does
Morante depict Mussolini’s fascism as merely the most recent iteration of a much older
form of violence—a single link in a historical chain that Morante describes as “uno
scandalo che dura da diecimila anni.”\textsuperscript{246} Even Nino, who fails to exhibit any self-
reflection or political understanding, acknowledges the repetitions of history: “Noi siamo
la generazione della violenza! Quanno s’è imparato er gioco delle armi, ce se rigioca!
\textit{Loro} s’illudono de fregacce en’artra vorta… I soliti trucchi, il lavoro, i trattati,… le
direttive… i piani centenari… le scuole… le galere… il regio esercito… E tutto
ricomincia come prima! Síííí? Pum! pum! pum!” (442) Like Claude Simon, Morante
plays with the definition of “revolution,” using it to denote circulation around a fixed
point and return of the same.\textsuperscript{247} It is for this reason that both Nino and Davide, with

\textsuperscript{245} “On the one hand, there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which
conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but whose regularity
and unison with what is experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions
and unnamable \textit{jouissance}. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, there is the massive presence
of a monumental temporality, without cleavage of escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which
passes) that the very word ‘temporality’ hardly fits [as it is] all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary
space” (Kristeva 16).

\textsuperscript{246} This was the subtitle printed on the cover of the first edition.

\textsuperscript{247} “E le sue pretese ‘rivoluzioni’ si possono intendere solo nel senso astronomico della parola che
significa: moto dei corpi intorno a un centro di gravità. Il quale centro di gravità, sempre lo stesso, qua è: il
Potere. Sempre uno: il POTERE…” (568)
disparate strategies yet equal fervor, fail to effect political change. Theirs is repetition as determinism.

Generational repetition, however, represents a more positive version of cyclicity. Ida’s self-actualization, for example, is closely linked to her gradual attachment to the Jewish ghetto in Rome. Ida, though half-Jewish, has always hidden this portion of her identity—a fact that helps her avoid deportation during the war. However, despite her best efforts to be “properly Italian,” she finds herself drawn again and again to the ghetto: “Riconosceva il richiamo che la tentava laggiú […] I suoi ritmi irresistibili somigliavano a quelli con cui le madri ninnano le creature, o le tribú si chiamano a raccolta per la notte. Nessuno li ha insegnati, stanno già scritti nel seme di tutti i vivi soggetti a morire.” (337)

There, for the first time, she finds herself part of a community with roots reaching back thousands of years: “In the ghetto, Ida is in touch with a set of mental representations that surpass the time and space frames of single individuals; thus she unconsciously and emotionally profits from the experiences and knowledge accumulated by entire generations” (Della Coletta 132). Arguing that ignorance of the past is one of the sources of naïve political optimism, Morante underscores the necessity of reconnecting with past knowledge in order to intervene in the political realm.

Though numerous critics pounced on repetition as the source of Morante’s pessimism, it has also been used to justify her enduring political relevance. Fabrizia Ramondino argues that La Storia should be read “non solo perché è un grande libro, ma perché ‘purtroppo’ è sempre attuale—quella storia infatti si ripete all’infinito nello spazio e nel tempo” (186). If Morante seems to be repeating stories that belong to a previous era (hence the accusations of anachronism), it is because those stories are always repeating,
and are thus always current—always politically relevant. This, too, helps to explain the appeal of myth: it can be adapted to multiple cultures and epochs, such that it, too, is always current, repeating enduring truths in ever-changing forms. Repeating familiar mythic tropes allows Ida to locate a community—even an imaginary one—amidst the violence and instability of war-torn Rome.

_The Eternal Present_

La vraie générosité envers l’avenir consiste à tout donner au présent.
—Albert Camus, _L’Homme révolté_

Though repetition is one of the most common forms of non-linear temporality employed by Morante, her work also disrupts linear time through the use of atemporality—that is, the blurring of past, present, and future into one utopically eternal present. It may seem counterintuitive for a utopian writer to bury herself so thoroughly in the present; after all, utopian longing is future-oriented. It involves anticipation of a better world. But as the epigraph from Camus suggests, investment in the present has undeniable political dimensions, insofar as present actions determine future states.

Morante accomplishes this temporal suspension through both thematic and formal means. Her digressions, for example, are very purposeful—“a halting of narrative time, a moment of contemplation before the character is returned to the maelstrom of ‘history’” (Wood, “Excurses” 77). In his famous analysis of _The Odyssey_, Erich Auerbach describes the way in which Homer’s digressions suspend ordinary temporality; the only time is the
present of the narration, which can be expanded indefinitely.\textsuperscript{248} This is precisely the sort of temporal dilation that permeates \textit{La Storia}. At the moment Ida encounters Gunther, the German soldier who will ultimately rape her and father Useppe, her fate is delayed by an extended digression wherein we learn about Ida’s parents, her childhood in Calabria, and her roles as wife, mother, and widow. In short, the moment of her violation is forestalled by the power of narrative and memory. A similar technique can be found later in the novel, when we are reintroduced to a tortured Davide. As we begin to learn about the horrors of his wartime experience—his entire family was killed in the concentration camps—the narrator takes the reader on a side journey to relate the final days of Santina, a prostitute whom Davide frequented, thus delaying, however briefly, Davide’s untimely demise. A single afternoon for Santina’s pimp expands until it seems to fill the duration of an entire lifetime, whereas cataclysmic political events transpire in a single moment, a form of temporal manipulation that upends historical hierarchies. These efforts to essentially halt time align with Walter Benjamin’s theorization of \textit{Jetztzeit}, or time that has been detached from the continuum of history: “It is by focusing on rupture, intermittence, interruption that the “other history,” the history of the oppressed, can be made visible. [...] In order to grasp the movement of history, its flow must be brought to a halt. The \textit{Jetztzeit} is exactly the moment that cuts through history, the ‘now’ that blasts its continuum open, thus disrupting and contradicting history’s claimed completeness” (Boscagli 165-66). Unfortunately, \textit{Jetztzeit} is not naturally occurring; it requires the intervention of the artist or revolutionary to blast it free from the ceaseless flow of history. Thus, once Morante’s characters have expired, historical time is once more

\textsuperscript{248} See “Odysseus’ Scar” in \textit{Mimesis: The Representation of Reality} (1946).
ascendant, to the point that time actually accelerates: in the final section of the novel, four years pass by in a single page, with alienation and oppression increasing exponentially.\textsuperscript{249}

For Morante, History is a fatalistic machine whose forward thrust ruthlessly crushes figures like Ida and Useppe; dilation of the present therefore offers a brief respite in which characters can at least imagine, if not actualize, a different—and utopian—future. Useppe in particular is able to achieve happiness through a unique experience of temporality; while conversing with animals or when hidden away in his Edenic grove, time essentially disappears. Even Useppe’s poetry exists in a sort of eternal present. When Davide asks to read one his poems, Useppe confesses: “Io non voio scivere... le poesie io le penso... e le dico... Io le penso, e subito me ne scordo.” (522) The impermanence of his art is not tragic, however, but rather allows him to respond to the world in spontaneous and unmediated (i.e. non-historically determined) ways.

Morante often turns to animals to metaphorize the temporal experiences of her characters. One of the best-known examples involves the odd tale of the lesser panda:

Esiste nell’Asia un piccolo essere detto panda minore, di an aspetto fra lo scoiattolo e l’orsacchiotto, il quale vive sugli alberi in boschi di montagna irraggiungibili; e ogni tanto scende in terra in cerca di germogli da mangiare. Di uno di questi panda minori si diceva che trascorresse dei millennii a pensare sul proprio albero: dal quale scendeva in terra ogni 300 anni. Ma in realtà, il calcolo di tali durate era relative: difatti, nel mentre che in terra erano passati 300 anni, sull’albero di quel panda minore erano passati appena dieci minuti. (282)

\textsuperscript{249} Though the narrator includes critiques of History throughout the “textbook” sections, her antipathy, if not all out hatred, towards the powers that be is even more pronounced in the final section: “Nelle nazioni avanzate, si estende lo sviluppo progressivo e mastodontico delle industrie, che vanno succhiando le migliori energie e accentrandolo in sé tutti i poteri. In luogo di servire all’uomo, le macchine lo asserviscono. Lavorare per le industrie e comperarne i prodotti diventano le funzioni essenziali della comunità umana” (655).
The narrator likens Useppe to the lesser panda insofar as both are beings “out of time” whose thinking fails to align with the rigid goose-step of history. When thinking, “il tempo comune degli altri per lui si riduceva quasi a zero” (282). This is partly a technique for passing long stretches of time alone, but it also suggests that time is malleable and subject to human manipulation. Ida, so traumatized by Useppe’s premature death that she lapses into a coma, is likewise compared to the lesser panda at the novel’s conclusion: “quella che per noi fu una durata di nove anni, per lei fu appena il tempo di una pulsazione. Lei pure, come il famoso Panda Minore della leggenda, stava sospesa in cima a un albero dove le carte temporali non avevano più corso. Essa, in realtà, era morta insieme al suo pischelletto Useppe” (648-49). Here, the temporal alteration emerges as a last line of defense against a trauma that is impossible to face—as a form of escapism.

Yet the fact remains that time, in Morante’s hands, is rendered susceptible to the powers of imagination.

**Living in Prehistory**

Regardless of the particular label selected—mythic time, magmatic time, women’s time—the one quality shared by all of Morante’s characters is an experience of being “outside” of time—or rather, out of sync with History. This leads to moments of anachronism and nonsynchronism. Ernst Bloch coined the term nonsynchronism to denote the time lag, or uneven temporal development, produced in the social sphere by the processes of capitalist modernization. “Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, by virtue of the fact that they may all be seen today. But that does not mean that they are living at the same time with others” (22). Though Bloch used the term
in an attempt to grasp why fascism had such great appeal for the German people, it is equally useful in the Italian context.

Though La Storia takes place in Rome, Morante is deeply invested in the “rural” mindset that lingered in the many Italians who had migrated to the cities for work but retained their pre-capitalistic traditions. When describing Ida’s origins, the narrator relates that, “L’avvento dell’era atomica, che segnò l’inizio del secolo, certo non si faceva sentire in quelle regioni; e nemmeno lo sviluppo industriale delle Grandi Potenze, se non per i racconti degli emigrati. L’economia del paese si fondava sull’agricoltura, in successivo decadimento per via del suolo impoverito. Le caste dominanti erano il clero e gli agrari” (28). Furthermore, “L’organizzazione burocratico-tecnologica del mondo stava ancora a una fase primitiva: non aveva, cioè, contaminato ancora, senza rimedio, la coscienza popolare. I più vivevano ancora, in certo modo, nella preistoria” (91).

Ida is one such “prehistoric” figure: she hails from Calabria, in Southern Italy, and maintains the superstitions and traditions of that area. She doesn’t trust electricity and believes in premonitions. The Marrocco family, with whom Ida and Useppe live for a spell, are natives of the Ciociaria region, which even today is known for the strength of its folkloric traditions. The grandfather complains endlessly that one can’t see the sky in Rome for all the buildings, and the others display an unwavering belief in the power of fortunetellers. One friend scoffs: “Solo delle cafone come loro possono credere in questi imbrogli delle carte,” yet she herself has great faith in the Madonna’s protection and believes that her brother’s medal of the Madonna will save him from the Russians (322). The narrator describes how, compared to Ida, “Tutto il resto del mondo era un’insicurezza minatoria per lei, che senza saperlo era fissa con la sua radice in chi sa
quale preistoria tribale. E nei suoi grandi occhi a mandorla scuri c’era una dolcezza
passiva, di una barbarie profondissima e incurabile, che somigliava a una precognizione”
(21). But for Morante, barbarism is no insult; on the contrary, it is meant to indicate that
Ida is more in touch with nature and her ancestral heritage than the rabble whose souls
have been destroyed by either capitalism or fascism. This is precisely the sort of existence
that Morante felt was not sufficiently acknowledged by Marxist ideology, which was
inordinately focused on the future of industrial life, rather than maintaining the traditions
of agricultural communities.

*Community, communitas, communis*

L’unica felice possibile: non essere sé, ma tutti.
—Elsa Morante

Though *La Storia* zeroes in on the lives of individuals, rather than viewing history
as enacted by monolithic blocks of people (the Italians, the Germans, the Americans),
Morante consistently privileges community over the individual. Ida, for example, feels
isolated and powerless until she connects with her fellow Jews in the ghetto. After her
apartment is destroyed during an air raid, Ida and Useppe are forced to reside in a hovel
of sorts provided to refugees. She shares the one-room building with several other
families, most notably “The Thousand” (“I mille”), a half-Roman half-Neopolitan tribe
whose exact numbers are difficult to pinpoint. The Thousand are described as possessing
a single body and a single soul; despite the bickering common to everyday life,
particularly in such a small space, theirs is a community so perfectly harmonized as to
transcend bodily boundaries. Though Ida, so accustomed to being alone, is initially frightened by this perfect unity, she eventually comes to admire the Thousand. Useppe, too, views them as a sort of beautiful, undifferentiated mass: “Senza dubbio, per lui non esistevano differenza né di età, né di bello e brutto, né di sesso, né sociali” (185). He literally presses his bodies against theirs in an effort to become one with this community.

Morante’s privileging of the many over the one can be linked to Simone Weil, whose notebooks Morante read voraciously throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Weil emphasized duties toward others over individual rights and sought to deconstruct the category of person in favor of the impersonal. The goal for Weil was “decreation”—an undoing of the self.\textsuperscript{250} Through decreation, we deny the self in favor of total dedication to God. And this “undoing of self” is likewise central to Morante’s political project. The character of Davide, for example, (who is often considered an avatar of Weil), fails to fulfill his revolutionary aims because he cannot let go of his individual identity, despite his purported Communist sympathies.\textsuperscript{251} He desperately wants to form a communion with the common worker, but his bourgeois upbringing and physical weakness create an insurmountable rift between him and the individuals he hopes to lead into a revolutionary

\textsuperscript{250} The seminal definition of decreation can be found in \textit{La Pesanteur et la grâce}, though the concept emerges even earlier in Weil’s notebooks. It should be noted that she makes a clear distinction between decreation and destruction, thus precluding the possibility of a nihilistic reading of her position.

\textsuperscript{251} Weil famously went to work in a factory in Paris. Not satisfied to merely speculate about labor conditions, she wanted to experience the life of the worker herself in order to refine her philosophy. In \textit{La Storia}, Davide attempts the same feat, though he scarcely makes it few weeks. He knows the work will be challenging, but he imagines those hardships will be tempered by camaraderie with his fellow workers. Instead, the noise of the factory and the assembly-line nature of the work means that workers have little contact with each other, and are too exhausted to spend their evenings talking of revolution. This disillusionment bears a striking similarity to Weil’s experience: she initially believed that she would discover something of human dignity in the workers’ stoicism and in their own interpersonal relations, but that expectation was brutally destroyed. Davide also shares Weil’s socioeconomic background: both come from wealthy, intellectual families, ready to rescue them from the hardships of working class life should they so desire.
future. Though he strives for communion with men, rather than with God, the central goal of breaking down the self in order to create room for another remains the same.

The vitality of community bears equal weight inside and outside of the novel. For Morante, poetry and art not possible in isolation from others. As Claudia Karagoz explains:

Morante maintains that the artist or writer, although tempted to ‘tell everyone off’ from time to time, will ultimately reject isolation because, ‘by his very nature, he needs others, especially those who are different from himself…Thus, he will stay in the game.’ In Morante’s view, artists see themselves as vital members of their societies, joined to others by an inescapable duty: ‘the function of poets, which is to open to reality their own conscience, and the conscience of others, is today more urgent and necessary than ever before. No poet, today, can ignore the desperate plea…of other human beings.’ (264)

Thus, for Morante, the Romantic image of a poet scribbling away in isolation, shunning society in favor of nature’s inspiration, had no place in postwar Italy. With humanity’s very existence threatened by atomic disintegration, poets (a term Morante uses interchangeably with writers) emerge as a final line of defense against destruction and despair. In short, poets serve the same function as the myth tellers in ancient Greece: both have a duty to aid social cohesion through the dissemination of a shared cultural heritage.

If writers like Balestrini located community amongst protestors in the streets, Ida finds it amongst the ghosts of the Ghetto and the banal habits of those forgotten by History.

Even after the Ghetto has been evacuated, Ida feels an irresistible urge to return; in fact, the knowledge of the Jews’ fates “was lost amid reminiscences and older habits”—amid

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252 “Nel mio vocabolario abituale, lo scrittore (che vuol dire prima di tutto, fra l’altro poeta), è il contrario del letterato” (Pro o contro 97).
her continued desire for community (338). While wandering through the abandoned
apartments she experiences an auditory illusion:

Dapprima la sorprese un silenzio irreale del luogo. E in questo i suoi orecchi,
ronzanti dai digiuni, incominciarono a percepire delle voci. Non fu, invero,
propriamente un’allucinazione, perché Ida si rendeva conto che la fabbrica di
quelle voci era dentro il suo cervello, anzi lei stessa non le avvertiva altrove. Però,
l’impressione che ne riceveva era che si irradiassero nei suoi canali auditivi da
qualche dimensione imprecisata, la quale non apparteneva né allo spazio esterno,
né ai suoi ricordi. Erano voci estranee, di timbri diversi ma femminili in
prevalenza, slegate una dall’altra senza dialogo né comunicazione fra di loro. E
pronunciavano distintamente delle frasi, ora esclamative ora distese, però tutte di
ordinaria banalità, quasi spezzi di raccogliticci della vita comune di ogni giorno.
(340)

It is worth noting that the voices she hears are not only Jewish, but also women’s
voices—voices that have been doubly marginalized and now risk erasure. Ida is called as
a kind of witness to their existence, which is already being written out of History. The
banality of their words is likewise key, as Morante insists on the value of even the most
everyday utterances—the utterances least likely to be included in official accounts of
history. The ordinary is what ultimately connects us across temporal and geographical
divides and allows Ida to approximate a community, transitory though it may be.

Integration and Disintegration

Eravamo integri, prima della Genesi; […]
Gli dei non sono maciullati dalla macchina
dei sensi. Sono integrati. Passato presente e
future – tenebre e luce – morte e vita – i
multipli e gli addendi – i diversi e i contrari
– per loro sono tutti uno. Forse il nostro
traguardo è QUELLO.
–Morante, Aracoeli
If Morante privileges community over the individual, her writing likewise frequently depicts the fusion of self and world—another key tenet of myth. Fusion (as distinct from community) is about integration as a means of combating the disintegration of the atomic age: “The atomic bomb impacts man’s ability to experience spiritual totality. The purpose of art, in Morante’s estimation, is to return to audiences the integrity of reality denied to them in their daily lives, ‘in their daily, and exhausting, and alienating interaction with the world’” (Lyons 251). Identity is frequently fragmented in her novels, but this is not a negative phenomenon (that is, it is not disintegration in the atomic sense); it is fragmentation as a prerequisite for fusion with the world, with nature, and with God. Breaking apart emerges as the first step toward becoming whole again.

Indeed, Morante’s works are rife with unstable boundaries: between outside and inside, between public history and internal psychic structures, between subject and object. This disintegration of barriers often results in characters seeping out into the world, or, conversely, the world seeping into them. The images are frightening—sometimes even grotesque—but ultimately pleasurable. Pain resolves itself as liberation.

While pregnant with Useppe, for example, Ida experiences bizarre interactions with commonplace objects: “D’un tratto, tali oggetti parevan o incorporarsi nella sua stessa sostanza, fermentandovi in un lievito di amarezza. […] E nell’atto che, costretta, si riduceva a vomitare, le pareva che il passato e il futuro e i suoi sensi e tutti gli oggetti del

[253] “La nostra bomba è il fiore, ossia l’espressione naturale della nostra società contemporanea, così come i dialoghi di Platone lo sono della città greca; il Colosseo, dei Romani imperiali; le Madame di Raffaello, dell’Umanesimo italiano; le gondola, della nobiltà veneziana; la tarantella, di certe popolazioni rustiche meridionali; e i campi di sterminio, della cultura piccolo-borghese burocratica già infetta da una rabbia di suicidio atomico. […] si direbbe che l’umanità contemporanea prova la occulta tentazione di disintegrarsi” (Pro o contro 99).
[254] For more on this, see Della Coletta, Plotting the Past (1996).
The goal of all of Morante’s characters, from Ida’s attacker to Davide to Giuseppe Secondo, is dissolution of the self: through sex, through unity with the mother, through shared consciousness, or through a prehistorical unity with nature.

Despite these lofty goals, moments of fusion almost always appear in banal contexts; for example, Nino, Useppe, and Blitz (the dog) are described as three bodies in one spirit as they gallivant around town (163). Lying in bed shortly after giving birth to Useppe, Ida describes the world as “un maro salato e tiepido nel quale il suo corpo si discioglieva” (96-97). As the novel progresses, the boundaries between dream and reality become increasingly fluid, such that by the end, Ida’s dreams seem more real to her than the streets of Rome. The outside world also bleeds into the oneiric realm; after Davide shows up for the first time at the refugee shelter, his moans seep into Ida’s dreams (201). Useppe’s movements likewise change the course of Nino’s dreams as he tries to curl up next to him in the night (228). For Useppe in particular, distinctions between objects are almost nonexistent, such that all sounds and forms coalesce into a single unified experience (532). Though certainly a less positive experience, Ida even experiences a sort of fusion in the wake of her rape—a fusion that inscribes the violent act within a cosmic order:

Quell’altro corpo ingordo, aspro e caldo, che la esplorava al centro della sua dolcezza materna era, in uno, tutte le centomila febbri e freschezze e fami adolescenti che confluivano dalle loro terre gelose a colmare la propria foce ragazza. Era tutti i centomila animali ragazzi, terrestri e vulnerabili, in un ballo pazzo e allegro, che si ripercuoteva fino nell’interno dei suoi polmoni e fino alle radici dei suoi capelli, chiamandola in tutte le lingue. Poi si abbatté, ridiventando una sola carne implorante, per disciolgersi dentro al suo ventre in una resa dolce, tiepida e ingenua, che la fece sorridere di commozione, come l’unico regalo di un povero, o di un bambino. (70)
Davide, too, experiences something like fusion with the world when, in the midst of a political rant, he realizes, “il borghese era lui… e la puttana era lui… e la canaglia era lui… e l’origine di tutta l’oscenità era lui” (594). The rigid boundaries that structure bourgeois culture never quite take hold for the marginalized characters of *La Storia*.

Useppe, as the mystical child *par excellence*, is able to meld with the world through his connection with animals: his consciousness fuses with the precognition of dogs, birds, and other creatures, thus offering him privileged insight into the world. His ability to transcend individual human consciousness in favor of other, more “natural” perspectives is important insofar as animals possess an innocence and wholeness that is missing from humanity:

> tutte le altre specie viventi, almeno, non hanno regredito: sono rimaste dov’erano il primo giorno: nell’Eden, allo stato di natura! mentre l’umanità lei sola ha regredito! e si è retrocessa non solo dal suo grado storico di coscienza, ma anche dal grado della natura animale. Basta ricapitolare la biologia, e la Storia… Mai, prima, nessuna specie vivente aveva prodotto un mostro al di sotto del *la natura* come quello partorito nell’epoca moderna dalla società umana… (574)

As the Marrocco grandfather never ceases to remind us, for many Italians separation from the natural world was still a fairly recent trauma. The fact that Useppe is able to commune with that world, discovering a hidden woodland oasis in the middle of Rome, underscores the central role that nature plays in mythic consciousness and achieving unity with the world.

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It is within this forest hideout that he most effectively achieves the euphoria of shared consciousness; the most notable example occurs when the silence “speaks” to him, with all sounds across time and space converging into one joyous song:

Il silenzio, in realtà, era parlante! anzi, era fatto di voci le quali da principio arrivarono piuttosto confuse, mescolandosi col tremolio dei colori e delle ombre, fino a che poi la doppia sensazione diventò una sola: e allora s’intese che quelle luci tremanti, pure loro, in realtà erano tutte voci del silenzio. […] Però dentro ci si distinguevano che sa come, una per una, tutte le voci e le frasi e i discorsi, a migliaia, e a migliaia di migliaia: e la canzonette, e i belati, e il mare, e le sirene d’allarme, e gli spari, e le tossi, e i motori, e i convogli per Auschwitz, e i grilli, e le bombe dirompenti, e il grugnito minimo dell’animaluccio senza coda… e ‘che me lo dai, un bacetto, a’Usè?...’ (510)

The fact that Auschwitz is folded into other, much more quotidian events suggests the way in which Morante envisions mythic unity as a response to the trauma of the war—a means of rendering tragedy legible through its proximity, and possibly even resemblance, to other experiences.256 Useppe’s perception of the silence brings him into contact with the totality of human experience, thereby banishing (albeit temporarily) the alienation of modernity.

The Monsters of Reason Produce Sleep

Morante’s staunch opposition to History (as linear, patriarchal, and oppressive) goes hand-in-hand with an opposition to rationality. In “Pro o contro la bomba atomica,” she defines History as irrealità (unreality) due to “its absurd brutality and its illogical obsession with evil” (Della Coletta 123). When reality becomes a grotesque nightmare, fiction—even the most “irrational” fiction—becomes a tool for combatting the tragedies

256 This moment can be compared to Ida’s auditory hallucination in the Ghetto, wherein we also see the tragedy of deportation commingling with everyday utterances.
that reason produces. Following the failure of Enlightenment rationality, then, the use of irrational or unreal genres becomes a means of reimagining an ethically or politically engaged position in the midst of postwar disillusionment.\(^{257}\)

If Adorno and Horkheimer upended the traditional understandings of myth and Enlightenment in their text *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Morante, for her part, inverted the premise of Goya’s well-known painting, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” insisting instead that the monsters of reason produce a deadly sleep. As Morante herself explains, “Perfino le macchine prodotte dalla scienza, che dovrebbero rappresentare i monumenti della ragione, si riducono, invece, a dispensieri inerti di questo sonno senile. Ed è logico, allora, che, dentro una simile industria del sonno, la vera arte sia guardata come un’intrusione sovversiva, e poco raccomandabile” (*Pro o contro* 70). Morante’s solution to the modern ennui bred by so-called reason is to awaken readers to the kinds of relationships and experiences previously accessible but now largely lost—experiences generated by myth and ritual. And “unreason” her is method for doing so.

So, what does this “unreason” or “irrationality” look like in Morante’s work? One of her strategies is to privilege analogical and metaphorical patterns over purpose-oriented speech, or Lacanian language, which is founded on difference (Della Coletta 136). Useppe’s poems, for example, are built on resemblances, rather than rational associations. Davide tells him, “Tutte le tue poesie sono centrate su un COME… Dovunque si guardi, si scopre un’unica impronta comune” (523). When Useppe first

\(^{257}\) In the tradition of Benjamin, Bloch, and other members of the Frankfurt School, Morante’s goal was to “transcend the rationalism of the Enlightenment and provide more intuitive means for understanding experience and dealing with such problems as alienation” (Zipes xv).
begins to learn language, he applies the same word interchangeably to any number of objects, such that the light bulbs in the house, the derelict flowers that Ida brings home from school, the hanging clusters of onions, the door knobs, a fly on the wall, swallows, and a gob of spit are all “stars” in his estimation (120). Useppe’s world involves an endless proliferation of objects seen as if they were something else (something more miraculous), rather than a rational evaluation of things as they are.\textsuperscript{258}

Another non-rational strategy involves Morante’s choice of genre.\textsuperscript{259} By relying heavily on dreams, fairy tales, fables, and myth—“irrational” literary forms—she breaks with the logic of Enlightenment rationality and propagandistic political discourse, hinting instead at mysterious, affective forms of knowledge. Furthermore, the proliferation of conflicting discourses contributes to her anti-historical efforts: “Tragedy, epic, comedy, and the lyric, high and low registers, the sublime and the grotesque are irreverently mixed […] in a (con)fusion of voices which once again reflects the author’s wish to question the patriarchal regimentation of human history and art” (Re 371). If reason is closely linked to arrangement and categorization, Morante’s works subvert reason by grouping objects according to a different kind of logic, or by eliminating categories altogether.

However, in the end, Morante (like the authors discussed in previous chapters) doesn’t advocate a wholesale embrace of the absurd. The opposite of reason is not chaos or madness. Instead, the ideal that she pursues is a marriage of reason and imagination: “Difatti, lo scrittore di poesia, e il romanziere in ispecie (uguagliato, in questo, forse soltanto dal poeta tragico), rappresenta, nel mondo, la compiuta armonia della ragione e

\textsuperscript{258} In fact, the phrase “as if” \textit{[come se]} is ubiquitous in the novel.

\textsuperscript{259} Genre is discussed more thoroughly in the following section on \textit{bricolage}.
dell’immaginazione: e cioè l’intera e libera coscienza umana, l’intervento che riscatta la città umana dai mostri dell’assurdo” (Pro o contro 67). In La Storia, Morante equates a lack of imagination with death, claiming that, “nessuna immaginazione viva potrebbe, coi propri mezzi, raffigurarsi i mostri aberranti e complicati prodotti dal suo contrario: ossia dalla mancanza totale d’immaginazione, che è propria di certi meccanismi mortuari” (90-91). Her project for an alternative historiography presents the writing of history as “a source of freedom, releasing the powers of fantasy and imagination” and posits imagination as a powerful weapon against oppression and disintegration (Della Coletta 122). In a world where “no documentation, no records have been kept, how can the historian fix the traces, register the presence of those who have been silenced and deleted from history except through an act of imagination?” (Boscagli 168) Thus, introducing imagination into history is not an irrational betrayal of facts, but rather the only way to disrupt reified political structures and create a space for marginalized voices.

What is a Novel?

Morante’s novels, while undeniably “novelistic” in many ways, also trouble traditional understandings of the genre, incorporating elements of poetry, children’s stories, psychological-focused family sagas, realism, magical realism, fantasy, myth, epic, legend, folklore, fairy tales, Arthurian romance, tragedy, and autobiography. When questioned about the genre of L’isola di Arturo, Morante “pointedly blurred generic distinctions, equating the novel with epic and romance, prose with poetry” (Cornish 73). Even if we limit our discussion to La Storia, we find within those pages songs, poems, nursery rhymes, fables, Biblical quotes, and political speeches, among other textual
allusions. The constant shift in cultural touchstones has a destabilizing effect on the reader, but for Morante, this is productive insofar as it unearthed previously neglected perspectives on familiar events.

In her essay “Sul romanzo,” Morante offers a fluid definition of the novel; after all, the word “romanzo” designates not only a literary genre, but also matters of feeling and passion (i.e. romance in the affective sense) and the tradition of old chivalric tales and legends à la Ariosto. The convergence of these three registers is what in turn gives rise to her mythic sensibilities. Critics were understandably at a loss as to how to categorize her style; “Una parte dei critici […] lo hanno situato fra i classici del realismo sociale; mentre altri lo hanno sistemato nel regno onirico della fiaba e dell’inconscio, o dentro le fantasie nere alla Poe” (Berardinella 18). Yet her writing reveals a constant slippage, such that no single generic category will suffice. “The product is a polyphony that serves the author in a project that is neither Neorealist nor avant-garde but simply—and as always—her own” (Lucamante, Forging 160).

This is relevant to the present study for two reasons: 1) this strategy, which I am calling *bricolage*, places her in even closer contact with myth, and 2) Morante’s generic hybridity has precise political aims, as well as literary ones. In *La Storia*, for example, Morante’s presentational style (the constant alternation between historical facts, folk culture, and Ida’s narrative) “breaks the conventions of the historical novel in a way that is far more thoroughgoing, and ultimately far more disruptive, than merely dividing the text into two completely discrete types of discourse” (Lucente, Beautiful Fables 259). The juxtaposition of such vastly disparate accounts of political events (disparate in both scale and affective register) renders the shortcomings of “objective” History even more
salient, underscoring the elements that are typically left out of official discourse. If critics were shocked, and even offended, by the superimposition of schoolyard songs onto the deportation of Jews, the shock was intentional; only by juxtaposing these discordant genres is she able to create a bridge between History and history—between the global and the personal.

For Morante, it’s not simply a case of drawing from different genres (which would be true of just about any writer); rather, she breaks genres apart and recombines them in innovative, and often subversive, ways. The key for Morante, as for her utopian counterpart, Ernst Bloch, was not to dismiss bourgeois literature out of hand, but rather to repurpose it for utopian ends.\footnote{In his introduction to a collection of Bloch’s essays on utopianism, Jack Zipes describes Bloch’s “belief that bourgeois philosophy, art, and literature could no longer express the questions and problems necessary for pushing forward the socialist experiment. But by no means was the bourgeois heritage to be dismissed. Rather it was to be reutilized in a manner that would allow its utopian undercurrents to be realized. Only through the reorientation, revitalization, and reutilization of language, and only through experimentation with what had already been designed to fill humankind’s deeply felt lack could the socioeconomic crisis of ossification, staleness, and degeneration be overcome” (xxviii).} Those who dismissed \textit{La Storia} as an uninspired throwback to neorealism, or even bourgeois realism, are guilty of a superficial reading of the novel which fails to account for the ways in which realistic gestures are often invoked tongue-in-cheek in order to dismantle the very structures they imitate.\footnote{Serkowska argues that \textit{La Storia} is much more an \textit{anti-historical} novel than a historical one insofar as it “does not aim at charting relationships between the past and present—whether in terms of opposition or of analogy—nor does it aim at teaching her contemporaries a ‘historical lesson’” (“About One” 383).} Sergio Parussa explains that:

When old concepts and images are used in contexts that are distant and different from the ones in which those concepts and images were conceived, […] they encounter new meanings: they come back to life in the present by becoming different. Old notions carry with them echoes of the past, traces of their history, vestiges of an ancient meaning or of old usages. They carry a vision of the world that is distant and different from the current one, but that, precisely by virtue of that distance, and of that historical depth, can speak beyond the speaker’s, the

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storyteller’s, and the writer’s intentions and generate new meanings, new life in the present: both for those distance and different concepts as well as for the present text that hosts them (141).

Just as myths are reinterpreted and rewritten in each subsequent age, adapted to the political demands of the day, so too does Morante strive to repurpose familiar concepts as a means of ensuring continuity and community in an era of alienation.

At times, Morante is explicit about the links between the novel (or her personal vision for the novel) and myth:

Liberato, così, da certi superflui schemi, e meglio inteso secondo le sue origini e le sue ragioni poetiche, il romanzo non può restringersi nella misura di un genere letterario, fissato da convenzioni scolastiche o determinato da contingenze culturali. Il gusto di inventare la storia inesauribile della vita è una disposizione umana naturale, comune a tutte le epoche e a tutti i paesi (perfino le leggende mitologiche e popolari sono già una specie di romanzo collettivo). (Pro o contro 45-6, italics mine)

Furthermore, she favored the novel precisely for its ability to transport readers to a sort of “mythic” era: “Elsa Morante ha visto nel romanzo la forma letteraria moderna per eccellenza. Moderna anche per la sua potenzialità magnetica di ripercorrere a ritroso la propria storia borghese, per risalire a origini pre-borghesi, all’epica antica e a quella cavalleresca, nonché ai grandi cicli fiabeschi occidentali e orientali” (Berardinella 25).

Thus, while strategies of montage and bricolage are employed by some authors with the aim of creating hyper-modern or postmodern texts (bricolage is often cited as a defining characteristic of the postmodern novel), Morante favors it as a means of reinvigorating ancient cultural traditions and literary practices with which we have lost touch. As Bernardinella explains, “Quasi che il romanzo, per conquistarsi il suo ormai contrastato diritto di esistenza, avesse bisogno, dopo crisi e catastrofi, di fare appello a remote fonti di legittimazione, di ritrovare fondamenta profonde e stabili, evocano, con un atto de
strenua magia artigianale, tutte le forme più solide e preziose del suo glorioso passato, sia moderno che pre-moderno” (32). For Morante, the path to political change did not involve a radical rupture with the past, but rather a meaningful engagement with it—not in order to repeat past mistakes, but to resuscitate tried and true strategies for generating community, thereby combatting the dangers of a hyperindividualized modernity. In the midst of the “crisis of the novel,” she successfully renewed the narrative tradition, not (or not only) by drawing on classical literary traditions, but by reaching back to “radici più antiche: al mito” (“Introduzione” 7).

**Gnomes and Maidens and Dragons (Oh My!)**

Il romanzo è un modo di rivivere, scrivendo, costruendo un completo e complesso edificio, la propria vera storia e il proprio mito. Celebrare quel mito e interpretarlo. Celebrarlo e demolirlo.

—Alfonso Berardinella

Though Morante undoubtedly adheres to the five tenets of mythic thinking outlined in this dissertation, one needn’t work so hard to position Morante as a “mythic” writer. On the contrary, the word “myth” makes frequent appearances in her novels. Vilma, the prophetic old woman Ida encounters in the ghetto, is described as a mythical creature; Useppe is frequently portrayed as a magical gnome; Ida is compared to the maiden who slays the dragon in tales of old. Even Bella the dog is likened to “una vecchia di migliaia d’anni, di memorie antiche e sapienza superiore” (437). Morante scholarship is likewise rife with references to myth. Abby Cornish describes the story of
L’isola di Arturo as “universal and recurring, like epic myths” (74); Della Coletta writes of the mythical memories resuscitated in La Storia (138); Serkowska highlights the irreconcilability of mythical and historical worlds in L’isola di Arturo, claiming that “Morante, time and time again, prefers the myth to the historical or the real world” (“Arturo” 153-54).

However, I disagree with the notion that myth is somehow opposed to the historical or “real.” Or rather, if that was true in L’isola di Arturo, by the time we get to La Storia, and especially in her later work, myth has undeniable historical and political dimensions. This is most salient in her essays in Pro o contro la bomba atomica, where her opposition to the atomic bomb is expressed in mythic terms; she compares “la funzione del romanziere-poeta a quella del protagonista solare, che nei miti affronta il drago notturno, per liberare la città atterrata” (107). Though some critics were dismissive of Morante’s attempts to discuss pressing political concerns with whimsical fairy tale images, Berardinella argues that:

la trasformazione del saggio ideologico in favola e racconto d’avventure, con lotte infantili fra il bene e il male, era in realtà un modo di scoprire la sostanza mitica che alimenta ogni azione agonistica e un modo di custodirne il potenziale simbolico al di là della contingenza. La favola ideologica raccontata in Pro o contro la bomba atomica risulta oggi più realistica e più politicamente nutritiva dell’intera collezione dei Quaderni rossi. (30)

This last phrase underscores not only the political potential of Morante’s mythic mode of writing, but also the inadequacy of more explicitly political systems.

It is important to keep in mind that Morante’s definition of myth deviates from classical understandings of the term; this is not merely a recycling of figures from Greek and Roman traditions (even if iconic figures may occasionally appear). For example, she
is careful to specify that the Jews returning from the camps were not greeted like Ulysses returning to Ithaca; Manuel, the protagonist of *Aracoeli*, is described as “un finto Ulisse di terra” whose quest is not at all the traditional journey found in chivalric poetry (130, italics mine). For Morante, myth is simply that which defies the categorizations common to modernity; that which can’t be “counted” in the capitalistic sense; that which is eternally recurring, even when there no longer seems to be a place for it. Myth emerges as a way of dealing with the modern crisis of conscience and loss of identity. And though not all of her readers were persuaded of the political efficacy of the mythic mode, they nonetheless acknowledged myth as a key dimension of her work.

Morante explains in “Sul romanzo” that, “La psicologia moderna ha insegnato che spesso l’angoscia, nella sua estremità, cerca una medicina e un riposo nella riduzione spettrale del mondo, e nel ritorno al disordine dell’informe e del prenatale. Anche nei miti, le lotte coi draghi infernali, le discese sotterranee, e le traversate dell’irrealtà notturna rispecchierebbero questa esperienza psicologica comune” (66). Thus, myth is not at all a form of escapism from pressing political concerns; instead, it offers a means of grappling with contemporary political tragedies—and, potentially, of transforming them. In this sense, it is closer to reality than the abstract political philosophies promulgated by many so-called “committed” writers. The imagination that undergirds myth is ultimately more concrete—more “real”—than so-called reality.
The question of “reality”—and the degree to which Morante engages with or represents reality in her fiction—was of central importance for critics from the start. As previously discussed, reception of her work was greatly influenced by debates about her position vis-à-vis realism, neorealism, social realism, and other related -isms. These debates in turn hinged on shifting definitions of realism and reality.

Thus, in order to determine the degree to which Morante addressed “reality” in her fiction, we must first trace her definitions of the term and her statements on the relationship between reality and imagination. What most people would call reality, Morante instead dubbed irrealtà, or unreality. To quote Garboli, “La realtà è sempre in gioco, sempre in bilico. E sempre insicura” (“Introduzione” xvi). Reality is “il sogno dei sogni” (“Prefazione” xxvii). The images most closely associated with the “reality” of the war—valiant partigiani, evil Germans, the liberation of Rome—are almost entirely absent from La Storia. Nino and his partisan friends resemble kids playing soldier; the Nazi soldiers are likewise presented as children, more interested in stealing wine than pursuing the enemy; and Ida is so exhausted from trying to hunt down food for Useppe, she sleeps right through the arrival of the Allies. The familiar narratives of the war are replaced by a landscape populated by mystical prophets, magical gnomes, and talking
animals; yet these figures ultimately reveal a truer account of the war—at least for certain segments of the population—than any official report.

What Morante dubbed reality was something that could only be located through the use of imagination—something often hidden beneath a surreal or fairy-tale veneer: “Often it is the most surreal and visionary path […] that reveals the ‘reality’ of life” (Lucamante, “Teatro” 248). Novels, then, are not escapist. On the contrary, “Un vero romanzo è sempre realistico, anche il più favoloso!” (Pro o contro 50) She defined the novel as “ogni opera poetica, nella quale l’autore […] dà intera una propria immagine dell’universo reale (e cioè dell’uomo, nella sua realtà)” (44). “Realism” in a novel is not a question of verisimilitude, but rather emerges when “la realtà corruttibile” is transformed into “una verità poetica incorruttibile” (49-50). Thus, it is in fiction—and a quasi-mystical fiction at that—that she locates authenticity. Faced with the destructive potential of modern technology, Morante views art as the only weapon capable of combatting the encroaching threat of unreality: “Difatti, nella laida invasione dell’irrealtà, l’arte, che viene a rendere la realtà, può rappresentare quasi la sola speranza del mondo” (Pro o contro 105).

Scrittore, poeta, fanciullo divino

If poetry is the last line of defense against unreality, then how does Morante understand poetry, and more specifically its relationship to politics? And how does poetry

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262 The full line reads: “Ma al romanziere (come a ogni altro artista) non basta l’esperienza contingente della propria avventura. La sua esplorazione deve tramutarsi in un valore per il mondo: la realtà corruttibile dev’essere tramutata, da lui, in una verità poetica incorruttibile. Questa è l’una ragione dell’arte: e questo è il suo necessario realismo” (Pro o contro 49-50).
connect with myth? In 1974, the idea of using language—specifically poetry—as a subversive political tool was hardly a new one. Indeed, this was the logic guiding the works of Balestrini and other members of Gruppo 63. At first glance, their respective theorizations of the function of poetry would seem to suggest a consensus; yet this was the same group that published some of the most scathing critiques of La Storia. How, then, does Morante’s definition of poetry differ from that of more properly “engaged” writers of the day?

First off, Morante defines a writer as “un uomo a cui sta a cuore tutto quanto accade, fuorché la letteratura” (Pro o contro 97). What does it mean for a writer to concern himself with everything but literature?263 The questions of reality and imagination discussed in the previous section are relevant here; I believe that, in separating the identity of the writer from the idea of literature, Morante wishes to underscore the fact that writing is never a purely aesthetic or imaginative endeavor. Fantasy and imagination are merely the tools used to communicate truths with a concrete impact on human lives. If this characterization of writing seems familiar, that’s because it’s remarkably similar to Sartrean or Gramscian definitions of committed literature; though Morante avoids explicit discussions of politics, there are undeniable political, or “committed,” resonances to her articulation of the writer’s responsibilities: “Quello che conta è la fedeltà disinteressata a un unico impegno: interrogare sinceramente la vita reale, affinché essa ci renda, in risposta, la sua verità” (Pro o contro 44-45).

263 Morante’s formulation cannot help but call to mind Paul Verlaine’s famous line: “et tout le reste est littérature.”
Morante is likewise drawn to poetry because, like myth and ritual, it effects cultural rejuvenation through constant reinvention of tired materials, freeing us from the restrictive forces of habit. In her notebook for Menzogna e sortilegio, Morante writes:

È compito dei poeti di rinnovare continuamente il mondo agli occhi degli uomini, che l’abitudine rende ciechi e distratti davanti alle cose, di rispiegare loro le cose con sempre nuove immagini, questo è il compito dato ai poeti quel sabato in cui Egli, finita la creazione si riposò. Io ho creato il mondo—disse—voi dovete far sì che esso sia giovane e nuovo per gli uomini in eterno—Da qui l’immortale necessità della poesia, senza poesia l’uomo muore di inedia. (qtd. in Zagra 31)

This is precisely the sort of repetition with a difference that allows cyclicality to emerge as a productive force. Change, Morante argues, does not require us to utterly abandon the past—even an oppressive one. We merely need to alter existing structures to reveal new or forgotten connections. When the world becomes static, poets are tasked with revitalizing it, lest this stagnation descend into disintegration.

We can also gain some insight into Morante’s beliefs about the ideal relationship between language and the world by turning to Useppe, La Storia’s tiniest poet-prophet; Lucente explains that, “Like Vico’s first men [Useppe] perceives the world and expresses those perceptions first in poetry rather than in prose. At the same time, his poems are not ‘fictional’ or feigned, since they represent real, direct perception of his world: Vico’s vera narratio and Useppe’s truthful fables are two aspects of the same manner of discovering and naming daily—yet also wondrous—surroundings” (Beautiful Fables 251). With his unmediated experience of the world, Useppe’s mindset is reminiscent of that of the German Romantics—though with more of a social dimension. Like the Romantics, he insists on a direct relationship between word and thing: “Si capiva che le parole, per lui, avevano un valore sicuro, come fossero tutt’uno con le cose. […] E perfino capitò a volte
che in una parola lui già presentisse l’immagine propria della cosa, pure se questa gli era ignota, così da riconoscerla al primo incontro” (130-31). Re likens Useppe’s poetic discourse to “a language that restores the natural link between names and things before the Fall of humankind into History” (Re 369).

Overall, Useppe rejects symbolic representation; he isn’t able to recognize the images in newspaper photographs, and indeed sees newspapers merely as raw material for the construction of paper hats. Ida notes that “il libro e il quaderno rimanevano, per lui, degli oggetti estranei; e forzarlo pareva un’azione contro natura, come pretendere che un uccellino studiasse le note sul pentagramma” (446). Davide likewise privileges the immediate and the concrete over symbols during his speech on the differences between Christ the man and Christ the symbol:

Perché qua bisogna intendersi: quello là [il cristo di Galilea, crocifisso] non va confuso con lo spettro omonimo che la Storia mette sugli altari, e in cattedra e sul trono… e… e lo incolla sulle insegne pubblicitarie dei suoi soliti bordelli… e… e mattatoi… e banche di ladri… sempre per nascondersi sotto il suo solo, vero idolo: il fantoccio del Potere! Il Cristo non è uno spettro; è l’unica sostanza reale in movimento… E quel cristo là storicamente fu un vero Cristo: ossia un uomo (ANARCHICO!) che non ha mai rinnegato la coscienza totale, a nessun patto! (589)

Abstraction, then, is a tool of the oppressor; only by engaging with concrete reality can these characters hope to impede History.264

The renewal of the world, which Morante identifies as the poet’s task, depends on a particular orientation or worldview—on the ability to see the world as other than it is. Fascistic and capitalistic oppression are equally skilled at stamping out this power to fantasize; Useppe’s purpose, therefore, with his anti-patriarchal, anti-Lacanian, and anti-}

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264 As discussed in Chapter 3, Claude Simon (echoing Lévi-Strauss) identifies myth as the science of the concrete.
rational language, is not to single-handedly lead the world to salvation as some sort of prophet, but rather to model a particular form of engagement with language and the world which readers can imitate in order to effect change themselves. Though *La Storia* was demeaned for its “pessimistic” tone, the point is not Useppe’s demise, but rather his relentless optimism during his few short years on the Earth. In her essays, too, Morante sought to articulate the optimism that is characteristic of all true art:

La qualità dell’arte è liberatoria, e quindi, nei suoi effetti, sempre rivoluzionaria. Qualsiasi momento dell’esperienza reale e transitoria, diventa, nell’attenzione poetica, un momento religioso. E in questo senso, si può parlare di ottimismo […] Se la coscienza non sarà discesa nell’irrealtà, ma anzi l’orrore stesso gli diventerà una risposta reale (poesia), nel punto in cui segnerà le sue parole sulla carta, lui compierà un atto di ottimismo. (*Pro o contro* 108)

Here she foregrounds the necessity of not giving in to horror but instead responding to it (and thereby overcoming it) with art. The effects of poetry can disrupt systems of death and horror by locating moments of happiness amidst tragedy and carving out a space for alternative futures. Redemption, then, lies not in the more properly historical sections of the novel (which are undeniably pessimistic), but in Useppe’s infantile poetic efforts, which, as proleptic projections of his desires, undermine the grim determinism of history. For Morante, all poetry was optimistic insofar as it resisted the horrors of history and unreality, and therefore her much maligned effort to present an enchanted vision of some of the war’s forgotten victims assumes the status of a potent political intervention.

Ultimately, the question of political commitment, or committed literature, revolves around the notion of honesty, or *verità poetica*. Useppe’s poems are praised not for any particular aesthetic or ideological properties, but for the unblemished truth they communicate. In “Pro o contro la bomba atomica,” Morante asks: “Ma infine, che razza
di romanzo o di poesia dovrà scrivere il Nostro per fare, come dicono i giornali, la sua lotta? La risposta è semplice: scriverà, onestamente, quello che gli pare. ‘Ai poeti’ ancora, disse, Umberto Saba ‘resta da fare la poesia onesta.’ Però, basterebbe dire la poesia; perché, se è poesia, non può essere che onesta” (116). Of course, defining honesty and determining which works adhere to—or deviate from—that definition is no straightforward matter. At the very least, it’s fair to say that, for Morante, honesty is more likely to occur among figures excluded from, or oppressed by, mainstream sociopolitical structures. Women, the poor, the uneducated, animals, and, most importantly, children retain a mythical connection with nature and the world which in turn offers them privileged access to truth.

*From the Mouths of Babes*

…thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes…for so it seemed good in thy sight.
—Luke 10:21

Useppe is not the only child to occupy a privileged position within Morante’s fiction. Most of the characters in *La Storia* exhibit at least some child-like tendencies: Ida is described as child-like; Gunther, Useppe’s father, is still more or less a child, despite the rape which inaugurates the novel; Carulina, a mother herself, nonetheless retains

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265 “E difatti, Ida era rimasta, nel fondo, una bambina, perché la sua precipua relazione col mondo era sempre stata e rimaneva (consapevole o no) una soggezione spaurita” (21).
266 The narrator calls him a “mammarolo” [mamma’s boy], and as he wanders the streets, he kicks stones like a child (17-18).
her powers of childish fantasy;\textsuperscript{267} Nino, even as a soldier or gangster, displays the boundless enthusiasm and care-free demeanor of a child;\textsuperscript{268} even Giuseppe Secondo, though nearly sixty years old, has a “comically infantile face” as he proclaims that the revolution is nigh (218). In her criticism of the corruption of the modern world, Morante often turns to children as a redemptive force. Though they inhabit the realm of the imagination, they are paradoxically better positioned to access “reality.” It is for this reason that Morante claims writers locate their kindred spirits not among adults, but only among the youngest: “Infine, rimane che le sue compagnie più vere lo scrittore le trova poi quasi sempre fra persone di età estremamente giovane, o infantile addirittura. Soltanto loro, difatti, riconoscono e frequentano ancora la realtà. Per legge universale, e peggio che mai nel sistema, la maggioranza degli adulti sono contaminati più o meno dall’irrealtà, e quindi, ostili” (\textit{Pro o contro} 115).

Of course, Morante is not proposing that the world will be saved by an army of child poets. Rather, the goal is for poets to rediscover—and disseminate—the innocent, honest, and unmediated forms of experience accessible to children. Morante is optimistic insofar as she believes this child-like perspective (what I am calling a mythic perspective) can indeed be recaptured. She even goes so far as to suggest that, by using children as our models, the revolution might actually be fun: “A questo punto, mi ricordo di quello che disse il maestro di poesia Umberto Saba: che in ogni poeta c’è rimasto sempre un

\textsuperscript{267} “La Carulina, anche se aveva messo su famiglia, si manteneva più ragazzina ancora della sua età. […] ancora leggeva, comptandole a alta voce, le storie a figurine e i giornalini per i piccoli; e si divertiva a giocare a acchiapparella e nascondarella coi guaglioni e i ragazzini del posto. Però, bastava un minimo lamento o protesta di Rosa, o di Celeste, per vederla accorrere preoccupata, con gli occhi spalancati e protesi come due fari d’automobile, nella direzione della sua prole” (183).

\textsuperscript{268} “S’intuiva che, dinnanzi alla sua pretesa di ragazzino, le Patrie, i Duci e l’intero teatro del mondo, si riduceva tutto a una commedia, la quale aveva valore soltanto perché si prestava alla sua smania di esistere” (102).
bambino, il quale adesso convive con l’adulto, e si meraviglia di quello che succede all’adulto. Se ne meraviglia, ma anche, io mi permetto di aggiungere, *ci si diverte*. Per sua fortuna, anche in questo suo pazzo e disperato combattimento col drago, lui un poco si diverte” (*Pro or contro* 116, italics mine).

**Panning Gold from Disappointment**

Despite conflicting claims that *La Storia* was both too pessimistic and too naïve, I maintain that it was neither. To a certain degree, this confused reception is understandable. Morante’s “philosophy” (to the extent we can call it that) is best characterized as negative utopianism; to superficial observers, the “negative” half of this moniker manifested itself as pessimism, the “utopianism” as naïveté. However, the convergence of the two terms creates something else entirely.

The “negative” outcomes in *La Storia* are undeniable; Nino and Useppe are killed in quick succession; Ida goes mad; Davide, his political hopes crushed, dies of an overdose; even Bella, the dog who acts as a sort of surrogate mother to Useppe, is put down by the police. In her analysis of the novel, Della Coletta acknowledges that, “for Morante no salvation is possible. A somber beginning only foreshadows an even sadder ending” (147). Yet, despite these sad endings for individual characters, she maintains that:

A positive history can exist. It emerges in the text as the projection of the narrator’s desires in a proleptic form. It lies outside the text’s chronological framework and calls forth a utopian dimension that ideally reverses the grim determinism of the plot and counterbalances the cynical assumption that ‘History is a curse.’ In this way, *La Storia* corrects the deterministic framework of conventional historical accounts. (147)
Boscagli concurs, claiming that, though no redemption is possible within the time of human experience, “Redemption for Morante is possible at a different level, on another plane of existence, signified exactly by what history does not have the tools to deal with, the many other marginal textualities, voices, and language that Morante includes in her writing” (176). In short, Morante eschews naïve (and impossible) happy endings; instead, hope emerges in the counter-history that the novel proposes, a history that creates a space for previously marginalized voices and posits the possibility of difference in an unspecified future.

Utopianism can be understood as a form of hope, and in the midst of the anni di piombo, there were many who dismissed hope as childish or detached from reality. Yet Ernst Bloch makes clear that “hope is the opposite of security. It is the opposite of naïve optimism. The category of danger is always within it. This hope is not confidence” (qtd. in Zipes 16). Gert Ueding, one of Bloch’s foremost interpreters, expands on this notion:

Utopia […] does not withdraw from the reality principle merely to place an ethereal and empty realm of freedom in place of the oppressive realm of necessity. Rather it does this intentionally to test human possibilities, to conserve human demands for happiness and playfully to anticipate what in reality has not at all been produced but what dreams and religious or profane wish-images of humans are full of. (qtd. in Zipes xxxiii)

Utopian longing thus fully acknowledges the deprivations of reality. Negative utopianism in particular is motivated by these deprivations; rather than positing an idealized utopia (in the tradition of Plato or Thomas More), negative utopianism focuses on critique of the present in the name of cherished yet tenuous beliefs, like freedom, equality, and justice. “The negative utopians sought to pan gold from disappointment, to find veins of hope in even the most barren ground” (Kaufmann). They refuse to depict political redemption,
yet nonetheless articulate a future-oriented longing that projects individuals out of their present hopelessness.

Thus, despite the tragic fates to which Morante’s characters are subjected, the novel’s final epigraph leaves us with a (literal) seed of hope. Quoting Gramsci’s prison notebooks, Morante writes: “Tutti i semi sono falliti eccettuato uno, che non so cosa sia, ma che probabilmente è un fiore e non un’erbaccia” (657). Useppe’s brief moments of euphoria may prove unsustainable, but at the very least he reveals the possibility of integration, community, and resurrected tradition—which is more than the supposed revolutionaries could offer. As Della Coletta explains, “This final opening toward a potential turning point sketches the utopian dimension of a positive future already inscribed (albeit repressed) within a present and a past that remain tragically dystopian” (151).

Despite the ways in which the term “utopia” has been depreciated—and this is even truer now than during Morante’s life—Russell Jacoby makes a persuasive case for the political utility of utopian thinking in an age of permanent emergencies: “more than ever we have become narrow utilitarians dedicated to fixing, not reinventing, the here and now. Yet the case can be made for writing against the grain of history, for writing under the impetus not of this but of a different period. In an era of intellectual triage, I attend the utopian esprit of another day” (ix). Perhaps utopias are anachronistic, but the imaginative power that allows thinkers to conceive of the world as other than it is is desperately needed. Rather than dismissing utopianism as naïve, perhaps we should look back to the “buoyant idealism and robust social enterprise” of another age, rather than giving in to despair (Jacoby ix). I argue that this was precisely Morante’s motivation for
weaving utopian threads into *La Storia* at a moment when intellectuals like Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper, and Isaiah Berlin, among others, were leading the charge against utopianism, claiming that it was too closely entwined with totalitarianism. Utopianism may seem to keep its distance from the daily to-and-fro of political life; however, “utopian thinking consists of more than daydreams and doodles. It emerges out of and returns to contemporary political realities. As I see it, this contradiction defines the utopian project: it partakes at once of the limited choices of the day and the unlimited possibilities of the morrow. It straddles two time zones: the one we inhabit now and the one that might exist in the future” (Jacoby 145-46). Thus, the labels “committed” and “utopian” are not at all incompatible.

*The Myth of Utopia*

Jews have always been motivated by the myth of utopia.

—Ernst Bloch

How, then, does utopianism tie back into the notion of myth, the organizing term of this project? As it turns out, utopianism, like myth, is closely linked to the principles of imagination, childhood, community, and orality (or poetry). As previously discussed, imagination was of central importance for Morante; she blamed everything from the concentration camps to the atomic bomb on a lack of imagination. Imagination is also the source of utopian speculation; thus, it makes sense that an age without imagination would also be an age without utopias. As Horkheimer writes, “The modern make-up of society sees to it that the utopian dreams of childhood are cut short in earliest youth” (277).
Indeed, if imagination sustains utopian thinking, childhood in turn sustains imagination. Thus, it is unsurprising that children are such key figures in Morante’s novels—quintessentially mythic, they serve as pint-sized heralds of a utopian future. Furthermore, the goal of negative utopianism is not the creation or a new state or political organization, but a renewal of human relations. Martin Buber, for example, associates utopianism with real fellowship and community. As I’ve discussed at length, this sense of true communion with others is likewise a key component of mythical thinking.

Yet another link between negative utopianism and myth is the emphasis on poetry and oral traditions. As Jacoby writes, many utopian thinkers felt that utopia “escaped the confines of the written language. Words imperfectly conveyed human desires and thoughts; they could hardly express utopian impulses. The written language belongs to the world of domination and control” (102). Thus, poetry and music are favored as more properly liberating arts. This resistance to the written word is clearly expressed in La Storia—most notably through Useppe’s illiteracy, but also through the novel’s dedication to the illiterate and the positive portrayal of oral traditions that characters like the Marroccos attempt to sustain even in a ruined Rome.

To those skeptical of Morante’s utopianism due to the absence of a clearly mapped out utopian future, Jacoby responds that: “Clues, fragments, and whispers—not blueprints—sustain hope. […] The unseen is neither unreal nor inessential” (143-44). He concludes his discussion of utopia by reminding readers that, “utopianism demands boldness and audacity in dreaming. This is an aptitude that does not automatically emerge in an individual. Rather, utopian dreaming is a fragile plant, which is prey to the prevailing weather. It needs protection, cultivation, and warmth” (148). In this context,
Gramsci’s botanical epigraph is even more fitting; Morante sought to cultivate the one remaining utopian seed amidst a storm of mechanistic Marxist thinking.

_Not with a Bang, But a Whimper_

Though I have defended Morante against accusations of anachronism and disengagement, those who considered her use of myths, fairy tales, and utopias hopelessly outdated were, to a certain extent, correct; Italy in 1974 was hardly a hospitable environment for such genres, which were rapidly being replaced with avant-garde experimentation and/or capitalistic technocratic fantasies. However, this is precisely why her use of myth is so important—and so politically radical. Yet even Morante was forced to acknowledge the limitations of this methodology in the face of such massive machineries of oppression. Reading the essays in _Pro o contro la bomba atomica_ chronologically reveals an undeniable dip in optimism as time went on. If _La Storia_ condemned its characters to some less-than-desirable fates, _Aracoeli_, her final novel, is even less kind. As Bérard explains, “By this stage we know that heroes, like Superman, can die and that the Messiah can fail: the luminous Arturo has left for the war, Davide Segre has turned into a suicidal executioner, Manuel Munoz Munoz has died without glory and without redemption in spite of the ‘cartolina dal Paradiso’ and the promise of Christ on the cross—all of these signs have proved bewitching and false” (“Morante and Weil” 158).

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269 In both “Sul romanzo” (1959) and “Pro o contro la bomba atomica” (1965), she compares the writer to a solar protagonist who battles a nocturnal dragon in order to liberate a terrorized city. However, in the later essay, she immediately follows the image with a discussion of why pessimism, not optimism, is the proper tone for great art.
Manuel, the protagonist of *Aracoeli*, ventures into the desert in search of his deceased mother. Yet, having arrived at the end of the desert, he discovers that it is neither the predestined passage towards a Promised Land, nor the location of the historical adventure, of the salvific regeneration of a people, but rather the apocalyptic land of extermination, madness, death, and of the absence of an omnipotent father God: in his place one finds, instead, emptiness, the inconceivable and incommunicable mystery of a love exposed in its nudity, its uselessness, and the gratuitousness of suffering without compensation and without resurrection. (Bérard, “Morante and Weil” 145-6)

With a little work, it might still be possible to recover a hint of hopefulness even in this miserable locale; perhaps Manuel is merely assenting to life to the point of death, as Bataille advocated. For Bataille, this “gratuitousness of suffering without compensation and without resurrection” is precisely what leads to ecstasy and communion. However, much as I would like to locate a lingering ember of revolutionary energy in her final work, this seems a disingenuous reading of Morante. If myth still had some power against the threat of atomic disintegration in *La Storia*, it was ultimately drowned by a wave of postmodern irony and bourgeois apathy.

Morante, always reclusive, became increasingly isolated during the tail end of the 1970s, and in April 1983, she attempted suicide. The artists whom she had considered her children—her beloved figures of utopian potential—were all dead: American painter Bill Morrow committed suicide in 1962, and Pasolini was assassinated in 1975. The irony, of course, is that the 1980s saw a resurgence of interest in so-called “traditional” novelistic forms, and in Italy at least, Morante’s work was held up as an example to be imitated. Serkowska insists that, “though one could hardly call Elsa Morante a postmodern writer with her emphasis on the primacy of poetry, *La Storia* definitely paved the way for many Italian (postmodern) historical novels of the eighties and nineties” (385). However,
though these younger admirers counterbalanced the hostility of earlier critics, they nonetheless fell victim to the same misreadings of Morante, who was always more concerned with utopia and myth than with formal aesthetic structures. After decades of vilification, the threat of the myth-politics nexus had finally dissipated—but so too had its political vitality.
Conclusion
The Death (and Resurrection?) of Myth

What do we gain by interrogating the intersection of myth and commitment in postwar France and Italy? My contention is not that myth played some radical role in postwar politics that was subsequently written out of history. If myth as a form of political engagement is an understudied phenomenon, there are logical reasons for this; figures like Sartre and Vittorini were simultaneously more vocal and more prolific in their theorizations of committed literature, and their central place in the scholarship is therefore understandable. Furthermore, the authors examined here are not necessarily “mythic” or “committed” in any conventional sense of the word; to read them as such requires a bit of theoretical gymnastics. Nonetheless, including Pavese, Bataille, Simon, and Morante in conversations about engagement is doubly enriching: first, it forces a reconsideration of their priorities, highlighting previously ignored facets of their social and political identities; and second, it nuances the definition of committed literature, expanding the concept to encompass the political potential of phenomena like myth. What I have tried to demonstrate is that, while skepticism towards myth was understandable in the postwar era, mythic novels nonetheless offered unique solutions to the problems of postwar trauma and alienation. Combining tradition and innovation, they modeled alternative methods of conceptualizing readers’ relationships with others, with nature, with literature, and with politics.

Nonetheless, the circumstances that led Morante to question the efficacy of her project are the same circumstances that compelled me to end this study of the political potential of myth with the late 1970s. By the end of the decade, neoliberalism and late...
capitalism had almost entirely destroyed the dream of revolution; the radical leftists with whom Morante had argued for so long, but who nonetheless shared some of her political aims, were disillusioned by the compromises of party politics, the relentless violence of terrorist groups on both the left and the right, and increasing economic instability. In France, too, the mid-1970s saw a rejection of socialism, Marxism, and “the type of left, philo-Communist politics which informed a belief that it was possible to build a radically qualitatively better world” (Drake 159). The election of François Mitterand in 1981 marked the return of a leftist government after decades of center-right dominance; yet the event was met not with celebration, but with silence. For most intellectuals, socialism was considered “well past its sell-by date” (Drake 169). Furthermore, the fact that Mitterand included four Communist ministers in his government did little to endear him to an increasingly anti-totalitarian (and thus anti-Communist) intelligentsia. Some have attributed this muted response to the deaths of several leading intellectuals around that time, including Sartre (1980), Barthes (1980), Jacques Lacan (1981), and Louis Althusser (who, though still alive, was interned in a mental hospital in 1980), but I believe the reaction is indicative of a larger trend in French intellectual life—namely the decline of a certain rapprochement between literature and politics and a loss of faith in tried and true forms of engagement.

By 1980, literary priorities had likewise shifted. Realism and “traditional” novels were making a comeback, as evidenced by the so-called retour du romanesque in France. Even postmodern Italian masterpieces like Calvino’s Se una notte d’inverno un

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270 Drake refers to this moment as “le silence des intellectuels” (see Intellectual and Politics in Post-War France, chapter 6).
viaggiatore (1979) and Eco’s Il nome della rosa (1980) drew heavily from traditional genre narratives. The trauma of World II still lingered, but representations of the period had been normalized, which made it possible to view novels and films set during the war as works of art rather than as didactic lessons in history. Papy fait de la Résistance (1982), for example, is a cinematic farce that pays little heed to either wartime heroism or the tragedy of collaboration, instead relying on irreverent slapstick gags. Yet, significantly, this “irritating bit of fluff” aroused no protest from viewers (Rousso 236). In such an environment, mythic representations of the war were likewise allowed to circulate unimpeded—though their affective and social dimensions had effectively been quashed. In general, concern with World War II had ceded to the more immediate problems posed by post-colonialism, globalization, and late capitalism.

The late 1970s also saw a reconsideration of the function of writers and public intellectuals. In France, the two intellectual models that Sartre had personified—the classic, committed intellectual, and the revolutionary one—were abandoned in favor of new roles, such as Foucault’s “specific intellectual.” In general, the focus shifted from broad, revolutionary-utopian dreams to more limited, local interventions. The intellectual’s purpose was now “to demystify not to preach” (Jennings 78). The emergence of new media also played into these changes. In the days before television’s hegemony, the printed word (especially journals like Les Temps modernes) was the primary vehicle for intellectuals’ interventions. However, from the mid-1970s, the “opening up” of television “provided a proliferation of new fora for French intellectuals”

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271 Stephen Benson dubs Calvino’s style a “quiet,” “discreet” experimentalism, as opposed to the more radical literary experiments of the previous decade. See Cycles of Influence: Fiction, Folktale, Theory, p. 69.
Though theorists like Bourdieu and Régis Debray criticized television for focusing on the individual, the sensational, and the scandalous, all at the expense of thoughtful, intellectual discourse, they were powerless to impede the médiation of philosophical inquiry. Increased media exposure, combined with the democratization and professionalization of intellectual labor, had the paradoxical effect of diminishing intellectuals’ influence on society at large. Jean-François Sirinelli refers to the second half of the 1970s as a period of “profound destabilization of the intellectual milieu and the loss of its reference points” (263).

Having dominated the French and Italian intellectual imagination for decades, littérature engagée was now dead in the water—and so, too, was myth. The conditions that had briefly kept myth alive after the war—the persistence of certain nonsynchronous communities, along with their traditions and superstitions—had largely disappeared by 1980, quite literally steamrolled by the machines of industry. Myth no longer posed the ideological threat it had in the past, but it was also reduced to a largely decorous status; rather than serving as catalysts for social transformation, myths now operated as mere entertainment. As early as 1968, Lévi-Strauss had warned that the novel, “born from the exhaustion of myth,” would lead to myth’s degradation, and though the authors considered here managed to forestall such a degradation in their own works, myth’s demise did eventually arrive. This is not to say that questions regarding the relationship between literature and politics have been settled; on the contrary, debates about the

272 “The hero of the novel is the novel itself. It tells its own story, saying not only that it was born from the exhaustion of myth, but also that it is nothing more than an exhausting pursuit of structure, always lagging behind an evolutionary process that it keeps the closest watch on, without being able to rediscover, either within or without, the secret of a forgotten freshness, except perhaps in a few havens of refuge where—contrary to what happens in the novel—mythic creation still remains vigorous, but unconsciously so” (131).
“appropriate” configuration of these two realms are a beloved intellectual pastime and continue in earnest to this day. Hannah Arendt goes so far as to suggest that the unresolved tension between art and politics is an essential critical force within the public sphere, and she therefore advocates keeping the conflict alive indefinitely. However, the parameters of the debate have undeniably changed as a result of shifting definitions of engagement and myth. The form of myth theorized in this project still retained traces of sincerity and hope in the face of modern violence, alienation, and oppression. Such sincerity has had a hard time finding traction amidst the disaffected irony of recent decades.

Considering the role of cyclicity in my analysis of myth, it is perhaps fitting that the relative popularity of myth and “realism” is likewise cyclical. Morante’s mythic utopianism was deemed anachronistic, yet Russell Jacoby makes a compelling argument for why we need negative utopias now more than ever: utopianism must be marshaled to counter “the dwindling force of the modern imagination”—our passive acceptance of things as they are (xiii). And indeed, if one were to cite a modern-day inheritor of myth, science fiction (which comprises utopianism) might be a leading contender; as the genre gains more traction in academic communities, debates about its political uses and abuses proliferate, echoing many of the arguments about myth in the immediate postwar period. Frederic Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), for example, uses science fiction to examine the opposing positions on utopia today and assess its political value in a post-Communist age. Through this study, he seeks to understand “how works that posit the

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273 See Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture” (1960). As David Carroll explains, “Culture attests to the possibility of this [public] space, which is threatened, reduced, if not eliminated or privatized when either the political or the aesthetic is leveled out through the neutralization of one of the two terms of the opposition” (50).
end of history can offer usable historical impulses, how works which aim to resolve all political differences can continue to be political, how works designed to overcome the needs of the body can remain materialistic” (xiv)—the same operations I have tried to highlight in relation to myth.

And yet, attacks against “irrational” and “escapist” (i.e. mythic) thinking continue; a recent article from Jacobin attributes the horrors of the Trump Presidency to the loss of faith in Enlightenment rationality and demands its return as the only effective means of overcoming destructive strains of populism. Irrationalism and mysticism, the article claims, enjoy a long historical association with anti-Semitism, and are thus the tools of the alt-right (just as they had been the tools of Hitler and Mussolini). The authors lament that, “criticizing Enlightenment thought has become fashionable across the political spectrum”—to which I would reply that it’s been “fashionable,” off and on, since at least the late eighteenth century. Is counter-Enlightenment thinking really to blame for our current political woes? To answer such a question would require a second dissertation; my point is simply that the tensions between rationalism and irrationalism, history and myth, political engagement and escapism may sink from view for a time—but like all good mythical creatures, they inevitably resurface.

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274 “If the Left wants to resist the alt-right’s growing power, it needs to return to the roots of Enlightenment rationality, which insists on the equality of all people and provides a strong theoretical basis for social transformation and universal emancipation” (Fluss and Frim).
275 “The long historical association between irrationalism and anti-Judaism suggests that they emanate from a common worldview. After all, the mystical, neo-pagan writings of Dietrich Eckart inspired much of the Third Reich’s racial policy. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Hitler’s friend and mentor, proclaimed that ‘every Mystic is, whether he will or not, a born Anti-Semite”’ (Fluss and Frim).
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**Conclusion**


