# The Ignoble Savage

## Racism, Myth and the Anthropological Machine

Alberto Toscano

> You civilized peoples, who are for ever speaking foolishly about *Savages* and *Barbarians*—soon, as d'Aurevilly says, you will have become too worthless *even to be idolaters.*
>
> - Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*

The marks and mediations of political turmoil in the writings of Furio Jesi are at once patent and anything but mechanical. In 1968, interpellated by the May events, he registered the rift with his erstwhile mentor in the study of mythology, the Hungarian scholar Karl Kerényi, in words of reverberant intensity:

> If fate dictates that I should be forced to address these words to the person whom I've considered my teacher ever since adolescence, it means the times are particularly dark. I doubt, what's more, that they'll brighten before first becoming even darker—before, that is, reaching the extreme point of crisis. This crisis will probably unfold in the streets and be fought with weapons; a crisis in which even a teacher and a disciple, a father and a son, will concretely find themselves to be enemies, in opposite camps.[1]

And yet the eventually unfinished project which these words foreshadowed, *Spartakus*, though it channelled that intensity into one of the most singular reflections we possess on myth, time and revolt, eschewed familiar registers of political address and position-taking. Instead, it elucidated the symbolic impasses and undercurrents of contemporary tumults through a meticulous immersion into the nexus of myth and literature around 1919.[2] This practice of detour and *détournement*, or repetition and recovery, is perhaps even more evident in Jesi's abiding attention, throughout the 1970s, to that forbidding complex of attitudes and mentalities he provisionally defined under the heading of 'the culture of the right'. In a moment like our own – in which a transnational mutation of that culture is bullishly pervasive, and when the Italian Minister of the Interior, the leader of a party that effectively 'technicized' the grotesque myth of a Northern Italian ethnos ('Padania'), can be heard urging the denaturalisation of Italian Romani – it is worth dwelling with this dimension of Jesi's intellectual production. Jesi's enquiries into the right's political mythologies can be taken as a response not so much to May 1968 but – to cite a particularly transformative date in Italian political history – 12 December 1969, the day of the bombing of the National Bank of Agriculture in Milan's Piazza Fontana[3] and the inauguration of the 'strategy of tension' that

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[1] Furio Jesi and Károly Kerényi, *Demone e mito. Carteggio 1964–1968*, ed. Magda Kerényi and Andrea Cavalletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1999), 117. Also quoted in Andrea Cavalletti, 'Introduction', in Furio Jesi, *Spartakus: The Symbology of Revolt*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, trans. Alberto Toscano (Calcutta and London: Seagull Books, 2014), 6.

[2] See also the essay by Ricardo Noronha in this issue.

[3] Jesi intervened directly, through his political journalism, in the debates around Piazza Fontana – the scapegoating and likely murder of the framed anarchist suspect Giuseppe Pinelli was a signal contemporary case of the 'persecution of the different' that Jesi would seek to explore in his 'ignoble savage' project. See Furio Jesi, 'A chi giova la strage', *Resistenza. Giustizia e libertà* XXIII, 11 (November 1969), 1; 'Prenderli ad ogni costo anche se innocent. L'uso politico dell'inchiesta sugli attentati', *Resistenza. Giustizia e libertà*, XXIV, 1 (January 1970), 2; Angelo d'Orsi and Furio Jesi, 'La "verità" di regime. Dramma e farsa nel processo Calabresi-Baldelli, *Resistenza. Giustizia e libertà*, XXIV, 12 (December 1970), 5-6. These texts are cited by David Bidussa in his introduction to

saw the Italian deep state find common cause with (or insistently manipulate) a galaxy of far right and neo-fascist movements whose progeny are still holding confidently forth, for instance in that particularly effective collective political entrepreneur that is the Casa Pound movement.[4] One could suggest here that the passage from the Kerényian juxtaposition between genuine and technicized myth which governs Jesi's mythological critique of the 1960s[5] to the thematic of the mythological machine that will occupy him until his premature death in 1980[6] should at least in part be referred back, not just to a far-reaching critique of the far left's relation to myth, but to the enduring force of myth in the thinking of reaction. This force goes beyond 'technicization' and gives us a powerful insight into some of the deeper determinants of Western political rationality as a whole – whence also the unsettling reversibility of political myth from left to right. As Jesi declared in an interview to the weekly *L'Espresso* shortly before his death, the culture of the right is

> the culture within which the past is a kind of homogenised pap that can be modelled and formed as one sees fit. The culture in which there prevails a religion of death or even a religion of exemplary deaths. The culture in which it is declared that there exist values beyond debate, signalled by capitalised words, especially Tradition and Culture, but also Justice, Freedom, Revolution. In brief, a culture made up of mythological authority and certainty about the norms of knowing, teaching, commanding and objecting. The greatest part of our cultural patrimony – including of those who in no way wish to be on the right – is today a cultural residuum of the right.[7]

Jesi's harsh emphasis in his writings of the 1970s on the nexus of myth and power politics also draws on his diagnosis of the culture of the right's insidious contemporary hegemony. In this respect, Jesi will come to define myth and mythology in a far more starkly negative light than

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the new edition of Furio Jesi's book on the blood libel, the figure of the vampire and the mythological machine: David Bidussa, 'Retorica e grammatica dell'antisemitismo', in Furio Jesi, *L'accusa del sangue. La macchina mitologica antisemita* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007), x fn 9.

[4] In English, see Tobias Jones, 'The fascist movement that has brought Mussolini back to the mainstream', *The Guardian*, 22 February 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/22/casapound-italy-mussolini-fascism-mainstream (accessed 8 July 2018).

[5] See Furio Jesi, *Letteratura e mito* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002 [1968]), as well as Enrico Manera's essay in this issue.

[6] Cavalletti dates the beginning of Jesi's work on the 'mythological machine model' and the origins of the 'mythological fact' to Spring 1972. See his editorial note in Furio Jesi, *Il tempo della festa*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti (Rome: nottetempo, 2013), 59. I take this opportunity to thank Andrea Cavalletti for the precious suggestions and editorial information concerning the place of the savage in Jesi's work.

[7] Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra. Con tre inediti e un'intervista*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti (Rome: nottetempo, 2011), 287. See also Enrico Manera, 'Religioni della morte. I volti della Cultura di destra in Furio Jesi', *Doppiozero*, 11 May 2011, http://www.doppiozero.com/dossier/cultura-di-destra/religioni-della-morte-i-volti-della-cultura-di-destra-furio-jesi, accessed 13 June 2018. In his introduction to the book on the culture of the right, Jesi draws on an expression of Oswald Spengler (whose *The Decline of the West*, translated by the far right philosopher Julius Evola, Jesi had helped to produce a critical edition of in 1978) to get at the essence of this 'residuum', namely the persistence of what Spengler had called 'ideas without words', and which the German thinker had treated as a kind of blood inheritance. Jesi notes that left-wing jargon (*sinistrese*) is often saturated with such ideas without words. He goes on to reflect on the likenesses between the flags and pennants to be found in museums of the Risorgimento, in the *Mostra della Rivoluzione fascista* but also in the hiding places of the Red Brigades (such as the red silk flag embroidered with the five-pointed star found in one of the group's bases in October 1978). As Jesi observes, this 'continuity is not one of *words*, but stems from the choice of a language of *ideas without words*, which believes it can speak truly (*dire veramente*), and thus to say and at the same time conceal in the secret sphere of symbol, that it can do without words, or better neglect any undue preoccupation with modest symbols, like those words that are not watchwords or slogans'. For Jesi, it is in grasping the functioning of these ideas without words, and their bond with the mythological machine, that we can renew the study of *ideology* (a key term in his rift with Kerényi). *Cultura di destra*, 27-8.

we could find in earlier work. He will thus write of myth as the 'presumed mysterious heart, the presumed immobile and invisible motor of a machine that can have many uses' and note that mythology 'is always the mythology of *a* power'. And, with reference to Walter Benjamin, he will declare that 'the perseverance of myth is already sufficiently demonstrated by the use of myth on the part of those who possess and wield *Gewalt*'.[8]

In this essay, I want to home in on one particular facet of Jesi's preoccupation with the mythological machine and the culture of the right, namely the figure of the 'savage'. As Andrea Cavalletti has detailed in his editorial contribution to the second edition of Jesi's *Cultura di destra* (The Culture of the Right), the latter's reflection on these matters was channelled into an unfinished commissioned pedagogical project – partially drafted in 1973-74 – with the working title of *Il cattivo selvaggio. Teoria e pratica della persecuzione dell'uomo 'diverso'*. In what follows, starting from a brief summary of what remains of this abandoned project, I want to follow the figure of the savage across a series of writings from this particularly intense period of Jesi's intellectual production, with particular attention to his study on the anti-Semitic blood libel and his reflections on anthropology and epistemology. Though not a reconstruction of the '73-74 project on racist persecutions, the construction of a constellation of the 'savage' drawing from Jesi's works of the 1970s aims to sketch out how his profoundly unique vantage point and method could inform contemporary debates on race, alterity and anthropology, as well as further contributing to the broader effort to identify in the 'savage' a key operator of demarcation and inferiorisation in the constitution of dominants image of rationality, history and politics.

**The horror of difference**

As Cavalletti notes, *Il cattivo selvaggio* was commissioned by the publisher Paravia in 1973, for whom Jesi had just completed an anthology of Ancient Greek texts on myth and history – *La vera terra*, introduced by Georges Dumézil – intended for high school students in the *liceo classico*. This second commission was for an introductory and interdisciplinary text on issues of race and racism aimed at middle school (*scuola media*) students. Though unfinished, research materials from this project went into the drafting of *Cultura di destra* and also accompanied Jesi's study into the blood libel and the mythological machine of anti-Semitism (on which more below). The outline of the project signals that, notwithstanding (but also in part because of) its target audience, the project on the 'ignoble savage' was ambitious in scope, and indicative of Jesi's singular ability to think outside of established frameworks. Jesi divided the project into five chapters. The first, on the same (*gli uguali*, also 'the equal') and the different (*i diversi*), was to begin with examples of racial persecution that would be familiar to his young readers, namely the Southern proletariat from the perspective of Italian Northeners and American Blacks. We can already note in this pairing Jesi's farsighted (and at the time rather unusual) grasp of race as a question also *internal* to the Italian or European scene. The chapter was then intended to anatomise, through a selection of documents, the way in which *differences* came to be occasions of persecution and to relate these to parallel instances in 'the first colonial regimes', namely to 'the differences between the civilised and the savage at the moment of the first relationships between European and the different'[9] within the framework of ethnocentrism. Chapter two, 'the savage, bad soldier' would then

[8] Furio Jesi, 'Scienza del mito e critical letteraria', in *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico. Studi su Rainer Maria Rilke* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2002 [1976]), 23-8.

[9] *Cultura di destra*, 265.

cover how racial difference – in the guise of supposed vices and shortcomings – was at stake in the figure of the 'good soldier', a crucial example of the ways in which the different come to be separated from the same (or the equal). The model of the 'good soldier' is a particularly 'transparent' instance for Jesi because it is 'organically connected to the social and ideological structures of the "racist international"'[10] – the latter term being another salient example of Jesi's intent not to relegate racism to an 'other scene' but to see it in its historical, ideological and structural globality. Chapter three and four in the book outline were then to be devoted to two further models. First, the 'bad worker', in which Jesi proposed to explore the articulation between the ideology of a full assimilation of the other as worker for the sake of successful exploitation, on the one hand, and the dynamics of racist devaluation, 'cultural aristocracy', and formal and internal colonialism that accompanied this ideology, on the other. Then, 'the savage as minor', in which Jesi proposed to develop the theme of the incapacity of the different to self-govern, and the paternalist theme of education into sameness. It is in the brief abstract for this fourth chapter that Jesi sketches the political core of the project, in what would seem a conscious nod to Walter Benjamin's notion of a 'new barbarism':

> The political movements that aim at the self-government of the savage and the abolition of the exploitation of the different: they are movements that support barbarism against civilisation (and thus also class struggle against collaboration with the exploiter).[11]

The book's final chapter was to be entitled 'Danger: Others!' (*Pericolo: diversi!*) in order explicitly to recall the Nazi posters against the resistance, with their warnings of *Achtung Banditen!* and *Banditen Gefahr* (and we could also think here of the philosopher Pietro Chiodi's remarkable partisan diari, *Banditi*). It was meant to recapitulate the documentary phenomenology of persecution established in the earlier chapter by delving into 'examples of the most aberrant superstructures created around the load-bearing structures of racism and of "discriminations of exploitation"'.[12] This chapter was thus to serve as a kind of 'diorama' and continuation of the first chapter, in which the pretexts for persecution encountered throughout the book – the supposed 'stupidity, vileness, laziness, aggressiveness, nymphomania, paganism' or what have you of sundry 'savages' – could be exposed in their intimate links with the ideology of the racist international and its attendant social structures.

Though a draft of the second chapter on the savage as 'bad soldier' can be found in the Jesi archives,[13] the only other part of the project which has been published, also in appendix to the second edition of *Cultura di destra* is a draft of the first chapter – though it is focused

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 266. This political valorisation of 'barbarism' could also be made to resonate with Jesi's literary valorisation of the 'savage', which in his vampire fable *La casa incantata* [The Enchanted House] (1960) repeatedly appears as a positive adjective, emblematic of a 'choice of authenticity and spontaneity'. See Emanuela Zignol, 'La notte, il vampiro, il ritorno nella narrativa di Furio Jesi', *Studi novecenteschi* 27 (60) (2000), p. 300.

[12] Ibid., 266-7.

[13] According to Andrea Cavalletti, it is incomplete and still at an early stage of elaboration, and not of the quality of composition and thought one is used to from Jesi. Interestingly, however, its principal examples are drawn from the discrimination of African-American soldiers in the US armed forces. Personal communication from Andrea Cavalletti, 14 February 2018.

primarily on the racialisation of the Southern Italian proletariat, and the related figure of the 'dirty savage'. The short text anchors its analysis documents from two different sources. The first is a reader's letter from a 1973 issue of the FIAT-owned newspaper *La Stampa*, contrasting the filthy conditions of Southern migrants' quarters in Turin with the ethos of cleanliness supposedly governing the lives of the city's autochtonous poor from an earlier generation. The others are a number of excerpts the from writings by Edmondo De Amicis – whose children's novel *Cuore* (1886) is a crucial milestone in the construction of a national literary ideology in Italy – bearing respectively on De Amicis's depiction of the relation between Southern and Northern Italians, and on his visit to the Jewish ghetto in Amsterdam. It is worth noting here Jesi's deliberate and inspired choice of examples from his own native city, Turin, in opening up a discourse on the 'racist international' – in *Cultura di destra* this would take an even more autobiographical inflection, namely in Jesi's use of nationalist speeches by his grandfather Percy Chirone as objects of analysis.[14] The pedagogical intent of this operation is also evident enough: Jesi begins from the most banal, quotidian of examples, a reader's letter, to indicate how the invidious contrast between the clean Turinese poor and their dirty Southern counterparts is founded on what he terms an 'aggressive analysis', saturated with a rhetoric of 'blood' (the *La Stampa* reader refers to herself as a *Torinese puro sangue*). This racializing analysis is founded on the systematic misrepresentation of the social conditions that lie behind the supposed 'filth' of the migrant areas – an analysis at whose core is the ill-concealed desire for aggression. Jesi then pivots from this hostile horror for the different to its manifestation in the writings of De Amicis. The move has a certain dialectical edge, since De Amicis is notable precisely for his nationalist effort to unify Italians across their differences. Here Jesi shows how in De Amicis's depictions of the counter between Southern and Northern Italians dirt is no longer a mark of *difference* but a passing obstacle to grasp the fundamental sameness and equality among Italians – which is in turn founded on a populist ideology of *labour*, in which, to quote a passage from De Amicis highlighted by Jesi, 'work does not make you dirty' (one can see how these reflections would have rather smoothly opened up onto the projected third chapter on the 'bad worker'). The contrast between the 'good dirt' of the 'good (Italian) worker' (Northern or Southern) and the 'dirty savage' is evoked through a long quotation from De Amicis's virulently anti-Semitic 'aggressive description' of the Amsterdam ghetto:

> It was a labyrinth of narrow lanes, dark and filthy, flanked by ruined houses that look as if a kick would bring them down. … Before all the doors and upon the broken steps, old second-hand goods were exposed for sale. Refuse of furniture, fragments of weapons, devotional objects, rags of uniform, remains of instruments, old iron, fringes, rags; everything that is nameless in any human tongue, everything that is spoiled by moth, or rust, or fire, or ruin, or dissipation or sickness, or misery, or death; everything that is despised by servants, rejected by pawnbrokers, thrown aside by beggars or overlooked by beasts; everything that encumbers, soils, stinks, and contaminates; it is all there, in piles and heaps, destined for a mysterious trade and incredible transformations. In the midst of this cemetery of things, this Babylon of filth, swarms a people so ragged, dirty, and wretched, that beside them the gipsies of the Albaicin of Granada are sweet and clean and perfumed. As in all countries, they have borrowed from the people among whom they live the color of the skin and the face; but they have preserved the hooked noses, the sharp chins,

[14] *Cultura di destra*, 233-53. Cavalletti also notes that Jesi's interest in the figure of Ettore Ovazza in *Cultura di destra* and a previously unpublished text on 'The religion of the Jews in the face of fascism' (now in the 2011 edition) can also be given an autobiographical inflection, since Jesi's own father, Bruno Jesi – a decorated hero of Italy's colonial wars, later target of anti-Semitic racial laws – was close to Ovazza's circle. *Cultura di destra*, 256.

> the curling hair, and all the features of the Semitic race. There are no words to describe these people.[15]

Inevitably, the words and the description continue, *ad nauseam*, as though only the hyperbolic accumulation of marks of difference and 'contamination' could compensate for the void at the heart of the idea of race that structures De Amicis's visual field, animating his rhetoric and grammar. The quotidian bigotry of the *La Stampa* reader and De Amicis's opposition between the good dirt of the Italian same and the bad dirt of the savage Jewish other, derive for Jesi from the fact 'the *different* (*il diverso*) are those who, with their dirt due to the social order to which they are subjected, represent an obstacle for those who deem that order to be both just and agreeable'.[16]

**The masked savage**

Jesi's insights on the ideological forms and social derivations of the persecution of the different find greatest elaboration perhaps in an essay diptych published shortly after receiving his commission for *Il cattivo selvaggio*– 'L'accusa del sangue: il processo agli ebrei di Damasco; metamorfosi del vampiro in Germania' [The Blood Libel: The Trial of the Jews in Damascus; Metamorphosis of the Vampire in Germany].[17] It is not my intention here to try to properly reconstruct Jesi's understanding of anti-Semitism as a particularly virulent product of the 'mythological machine' – that 'enigmatic device whose functioning produces mythologies'[18] and 'mythological facts' that 'concentrate into a single extra-temporal, extra-spatial point, the lights that shine from past and future'.[19] Rather, I want to home in on the role that the articulation with and contrast with the 'savage' plays in Jesi's conception of anti-Semitism (and of racializing thought more broadly).

The first part of 'The Blood Libel' is a philologically fascinating and historically layered exploration of the archival material around a 'late' instance of the anti-Semitic accusation of ritual murder, from 1840 in Damascus,[20] which Jesi treats both as an object of meticulous investigation in its own right and as a testing-ground for the paradigm of the mythological machine, whose elaboration takes up much of his writing from the 1970s. The question of the savage enters into Jesi's study of the blood libel as part of an effort to circumscribe the coordinates of the Catholic anti-Semitism of the late 19th century which largely colours the archival material around the Damascus trial of 1840. This anti-Semitism is partially built on the scaffolding of an Enlightenment tradition (still very much present, it should be noted, in the disputations over the Jewish Question between Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx), which castigated Jewish alterity as a kind of ethno-religious 'particularism'. Commenting on an 1845 text from the liberal, anti-clerical Italian writer Aurelio Bianchi-Giovini, Jesi notes the

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[15] Cited in *Cultura di destra*, 276. English translation from Edmondo De Amicis, *Holland and Its People*, trans. Caroline Tilton (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1881), 257-8.

[16] *Cultura di destra*, 285.

[17] Furio Jesi, 'L'accusa del sangue: il processo agli ebrei di Damasco; metamorfosi del vampiro in Germania', *Comunità,* XXVII, 170 (October 1973), 260-302. Republished as Furio Jesi, *L'accusa del sangue. La macchina mitologica antisemita*, op. cit.

[18] *L'accusa del sangue*, 6.

[19] *L'accusa del sangue*, 17.

[20] Though given the aforementioned 'extra-temporal, extra-spatial' character of myth the events of 1840 will interact with earlier and later occurrences, real or imagined – for instance a 'mythical' massacre of Christians from 1860. *L'accusa del sangue*, 20.

'contradiction' evidenced by this kind of ideological stance between, on the one hand, the recognition of a continuity between an ancient and Biblical tradition in the midst of the modern world, and, on the other, the tendency to desire the termination of particularism. For Jesi, this contradiction was an inevitable side-effect of the situation within a capitalist society of any non-dominant religious tradition; perhaps more importantly, it signalled the identification of the Jewish other as an 'obstacle' to a new Enlightened order. Judaism here appeared as the foundation of 'dangerous alterities, incompatible with the homogeneity, the "equality" of all the limbs of the social body'; Jesi adding, in an astute comment on the capitalist dialectic of Enlightenment, echoing the core thrust of Marx's famous riposte to Bauer, that 'on this "equality", the "immortal principle of '89" rests the possibility of imposing without excessively severe conflicts the norm of capitalist society'.[21]

Two elements sketched out in the plan for *Il cattivo selvaggio* are here brought together: first, the demarcation between the same-equal and the other-different; second, the way in which this demarcation is animated by the 'homogenising' drives of an exploitative social order. But the articulation between anti-Semitism and the figure of the savage is more specifically advanced by Jesi in his effort to try and glean the components of the anti-Semitic mythological machine while also periodising its functioning. The virulent myth of Jewish thirst for Christian blood is seen by Jesi to combine 'magical' (or witchcraft) as well as 'historico-religious' interpretations. In the latter, it is in being faced with irrefutable proof of Christ's divinity that Jews devise 'a horrible equivalent of the eucharist'. In a version reported in the early seventeenth century, the notion was advanced that it was a catastrophic misunderstanding of the meaning of salvation through the blood of Christ (*sanguine Christiano*) that led to the ritual murder of Christians as a way of seeking to reverse the curse of deicide. Here the historico-religious dimension is mixed with the idea of a redemptive use of blood, contiguous with notions of ritual anthropophagy and vampirism that likened Jews to witches. According to Jesi, with the Damascus trial it was not (an anachronistic) witchcraft as much as a kind of ethnological variant on the historico-religious accusation of heresy that came to the fore. The blood libel thus took on the 'far more credible and contemporary physiognomy of a trial against semi-savages who had massacred a missionary to celebrate their own rites'. What emerges from Catholic chronicles and apologias of the trial of Damascus is thus a placement of the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew at the hinge between the 'savage' and the 'heretic'. Commenting on the 1896 chronicle of the 1840 Damascus blood libel trial, *Aceldama*, promoted by a Sardinian Capuchin Monastery (the missionary who was the alleged victim of the Damascene ritual murder, Tommaso da Calangiano, was a Capuchin), Jesi writes that Jews, presented as a 'sacrificing and anthropophagous' people, were seen to manifest

> a singular admixture of civilisation and 'savage' nature, of culture (albeit in the most negative sense, as refined hypocrisy, shrewdness, cunning mimesis) and cannibalistic drives. The accusation directed at them – in their devotion to ritual homicides – was not of the kind aimed at pure and simple 'cannibal' savages, but neither was it the one reserved for heretics deemed guilty of human sacrifices. 'Savages' were wholly 'savages', they did not possess any glimmer of civilisation; their evil belonged to the demons making use of their ignorance. But heretics, though deemed to be murderers of children, were not of a stock [*stirpe*] tending toward evil through their intrinsic nature: they did not possess [here Jesi quotes from *Aceldama*] 'frighteningly expanded … the [cranial] protuberance of the crude, ferocious and bloodthirsty spirit'.[22]

[21] *L'accusa del sangue*, 22.
[22] *L'accusa del sangue*, 33.

Jesi's documentary, mythological and historical analysis of the materials produced around the Damascus trial thus reveals the specificity of late 19th century Catholic *racism*, which cannot be simply equated with the theories of white supremacy of a Gobineau or Chamberlain, or with their interwar *epigoni*, for instance – as Jesi notes – the intellectuals behind *Difesa della razza*, the foremost journal of Italian racial science under Fascism. Here it is worth quoting Jesi's reflections on the specificity of this figure of racism and its triangulation with anti-Black racism as well as with the racial and anthropological figure of the savage:

> But [unlike Fascist racism] 19th century anti-Semitic Catholic racism does not include under the same accusation of 'inferiority' Blacks and Jews. It consists instead of the will to condemn the heinous deeds of a people which because of its intrinsic, 'phrenological' (racial) nature, inexorably tends towards evil, to the ferocity of 'savages' and which nevertheless (unlike Blacks) is not wholly 'savage' but rather has hypocritically and externally civilised itself – and which has thus been able to continue to satisfy its blood-thirsty instincts within the very fabric of 'civilised' societies. We are not dealing with a racism oriented towards the general perspective of all the human 'races', but with a racism that aims to distinguish, among apparently 'civilised' men, and not among the others, those who hypocritically mask under semblances of civility their true 'savage' nature, their 'crude, ferocious and bloodthirsty spirit'. This racism is therefore not identical to the one of colonisers faced with 'savages', but it is one that is partially analogous to the one that endures, for example, in the United States against Blacks: which strikes not 'savages' in their pure state, but masked 'savages', those whom with cunning and hypocrisy have managed to feign 'civilisation'.[23]

This *leitmotiv* of the Jew as a kind of savage in disguise is also linked to the sordid myths of blood rites in Catholic anti-Semitism which 'implicitly recognised a demonic bind between the "anthropophagy" and "ritual vampirism" of the Jews and their cunning (which was indeed, diabolical in kind)'.[24] The result of this network of mythical, magical and racial images is a form of persecution which rather than a witch-hunt is a 'hunt of the "savage" camouflaged as civilised man, a hunt for *The Wild Man Within*'.[25] Crucially, Jesi will argue that the mythologist's perspective can enhance and complement a social and historical analysis of the kind of racism that treats the Jew as a diabolically cunning 'savage' and foreign body in the midst of Christian civil society. Namely, 'the study of the mythological fact allows one to add some considerations regarding the particular modality of this marginalisation [of the Jew] and regarding the reaction to the "other" and the "different" [*diverso*] that conditions these

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[23] *L'accusa del sangue*, 34. The section of the essay which follows this statement includes another variant of racial difference as embodied in the anti-Semitic imaginary: Jesi draws on *Crowds and Power* by Elias Canetti (an author he both translated into Italian and wrote illuminatingly about) to comment on the recurrence of the image of the 'clawed hand' of the Jew, symbolising the threat of an Other who can either snatch children (the murderer) or money (the usurer). As Jesi comments: 'The Jew is the *other* [*il diverso*] because he possesses cash money as well as that metaphysical money that consists of the Old Testament. To the Christian, he lends cash money and secret money, gold and the Torah, but in exchange and with the ample interest of a concrete and spectral usury, he reaches out his hand, grasping; he is the *other* who grasps and drags into his secret the debtors: ritual victims, rather than the initiated. He is the "butcher", the "slaughterer", because in his *different* [*diverso*] world, the Christian can enter only as an animal fit to slaughter not as a neophyte' (36).

[24] *L'accusa del sangue*, 37.

[25] *L'accusa del sangue*, 36. Jesi's reference is to E. Dudley and M.E. Novak (eds.), *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pitssburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972). For a political genealogy of the racialised 'manhunt', see Grégoire Chamayou, *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); for an extremely rich treatment of the connections between the European figure of the 'wild man' and the colonial projection of the 'savage', see Roger Bartra, *El mito del salvaje* (México: FCE, 2011).

modalities'.[26] By contrast with the modern permutations of 'vampirism' which Jesi will explore, in fascinating connection to the psycho-political fate of feudalism, in the second part of *L'accusa del sangue*,[27] Jesi defines the specificity of the anti-Semitic blood libel by way of three observations: first, the accusation of anthropophagy against Jews is actually pre-Christian and plays a marginal role in Christian anti-Semitism; second, the blood libel proper emerges around the year 1000 in a Christian milieu; third, its specific connection is to the theme of infanticide. Whence the conclusion, which draws on the motif of a mythic inversion dear to Kerényi, that the blood libel is born of a 'negative reversal of Christ's sacrifice (the "deicide" people continued to make Christian blood flow, after having stained itself with the blood of Christ), united with the survivals of the memories of child sacrifices among "pagans", which thus acquired the value of ritual repetitions of the crucifixion'.[28] This mythical inversion or reversal is intimately linked for Jesi to the inversions and reversals that mark the racist imaginary of otherness and difference:

> As the 'different' [*diverso*] par excellence, the Jew thus took on the precise physiognomy of a human being symmetrically opposed to the Christian: not only, like the 'pagans', did the Jew practice bizarre, risible, clumsy rituals, he did *exactly the contrary* of what Christians did. And we know that these precise symmetries, these couples of opposites, are peculiar to the functioning of the 'mythological machine'. … The documents related to the 'blood libel' allow us to observe a specific functioning of the 'mythological machine': the reversal of myth is deliberate and is carried out in parallel to the conservation, at the sacral level, of the myth itself.[29]

The archival exploration of the Damascene blood libel trial of 1840, and its discursive and ideological milieu, thus allows Jesi to make explicit the link between myth and racism already at work in the pedagogical project of *Il cattivo selvaggio*, arguing that in this case the mythological machine operates through 'the experience of the "different" (of the *different man* [*uomo diverso*]) which issues into the configuration of a difference that is symmetrical contraposition, of the kind that exists between Good and Evil: the "different" is not only the *different*, but the *contrary*'. It is worth noting also that Jesi integrates into this account of the mythical production of race and the racial production of myth both a psychological element (in which the blood libel is a veritable 'transfert', imposed upon and punished in others, of the anxious guilt that plagues Christians as they contemplate the mystery of the cross) and a socio-economic one (with Jesi acknowledging that the Damascus trial also manifests historical factors that relate more closely to the 'economic, social and political developments of the accusation against the "different" than to psychological-religious aspects').[30]

**Knowability of the savage**

As we have just seen, the figure of the 'savage' allows Jesi better to specify the particularity of the racial ideology that animates late 19th century Catholic anti-Semitism, and to delineate

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[26] *L'accusa del sangue*, 37.

[27] The relation between the figures of the vampire, the Jew and the savage, as explored in Jesi's writing, is too complex to do any justice to here. I hope to prolong the analysis sketched out in this article in a subsequent article dealing with the way in which Jesi's understanding of the metamorphoses of the vampire and their entanglement with both economic and mythic frames can also contribute to reconstructing from his writings a theory of the 'racial machine'. Such an inquiry will require engagement, by way of counterpoint, with Jesi's vampire novel: *L'ultima notte*, ed. Giulio Schiavoni (Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2015). See also Zignol, op. cit.

[28] *L'accusa del sangue*, 39.

[29] *L'accusa del sangue*, 40.

[30] *L'accusa del sangue*, 41.

the operations of the mythological machine that produces the blood libel as a kind of 'mythological fact'. But the problem of the 'savage' is also operative at another level of Jesi's work from the 1970s, namely that of the nexus between mythology and anthropology.[31] It is present in his posthumously published work on the jurist, historian and mythologist Johann Jakob Bachofen, namely in an incisive analysis of the efforts to equate or to distinguish between *ancients* and *savages* in 19th century mythological sciences, as a way of testing 'the epistemological models used for multiple categories of the *different* (*diverso*)'.[32] We also encounter it in Jesi's exploration of the links between the sciences of myth, the emergence of colonial ethnology and esotericism in the Enlightenment, all oriented – as he shows through the peculiar figure of the freemason, occultist and ethnologist Dom Pernety – towards a 'global science of man'.[33] And we also find it in Jesi's monograph on Rousseau, where, intervening in the debates generated by the writings on the Genevan philosopher by Lévi-Strauss, Starobinski and Derrida, he presents the figure of the 'noble savage' as a *non-mythical* symbol that served to investigate the present and make anthropology possible.[34] But arguably the crucial instance of the savage in Jesi's critical (and political) epistemology of myth is to be found in the essay 'Conoscibilità della festa' (Knowability of the Festival) which served as the introductory essay to Jesi's 1977 anthology of texts anthropological texts on the 'festival', *Le festa*. For Jesi, the practice of anthologising was part and parcel of a critical method of composition partially indebted to Walter Benjamin,[35] but which, in the brief methodological prelude to the anthology, he captures through Ezra Pound's image of the 'rose in the steel dust': 'It is important to grasp, anthologically, through citations and as the outcome of composition, *the rose*, to be able to become fully aware of *the steel dust*, of how much *the steel dust* is harshness, obligatory unknowability, precarious or ruined collectivity,

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[31] On this nexus, see especially Furio Jesi, *Mito* (Milan: Mondadori, 1980 [1973]) and *Materiali mitologici. Mito e antropologia nella cultura mitteleuropea*, new ed., ed. Andrea Cavalletti (Turin: Einaudi, 2001 [1979]).

[32] Furio Jesi, *Bachofen*, ed. Andrea Cavalletti (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005), 25-30. Jesi links this question to the way in which in mythology and anthropology difference (*diversità*) is linked to the question of the *secret* and the latter to what may be difference *par excellence*, namely *temporal difference*. In this frame, savages, unlike ancients, suffer from an excessive *contemporaneity*. For an appearance of the figure of the savage in Jesi's work on ancient myth, see his brief piece on Book X of *The Odyssey*: 'Polifemo e il selvaggio' (1971), in Marco Belpoliti and Enrico Manera (eds.), *Riga 31: Furio Jesi* (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2010), 120-5.

[33] Furio Jesi, 'Ermeneutica e scienza del mito (1750-1850)', in *Mitologie intorno all'illuminismo* (Bergamo: Pierluigi Lubrina, 1990 [1972]), 165-70. On Pernety, see also *Bachofen*, 25-26.

[34] 'The state of nature is thus not necessarily the effective prehistory of civil society, nor is natural goodness the effective prehistoric antecedent from which emerged – with a "leap" – the ethical virtue of civilised man (*uomo civile*). State of nature and natural goodness are symbols employed by Rousseau as methodological instruments to investigate contemporary reality. … Rousseau can rightly be considered as the founder of modern ethnology because he was perfectly cognizant of the lack of objective elements on which to ground the study both of primordial humanity and of living "savages", he pushed for a search for precise data on these matters, and – given the documentary possibilities at his disposal – he confined himself to using arbitrary reconstructions of the life of natural man as symbolic methodological instruments, as particularly meaningful "exploits" (*"imprese"*), useful for the *technique* of inquiring into civilised man. Didactic exploits and symbols possess an internal veracity'. Furio Jesi, *Che cosa ha 'veramente' detto Rousseau* (Roma: Ubaldini, 1972), 56-7. I think it would be very productive to follow the resonances and contrasts between, on the one hand, Jesi's work on the savage and the figures of *il diverso*, and, on the other, the work of other contemporaneous Italian historians who tried to excavate the political and philosophical origins of the figure of the savage. See especially Giuliano Gliozzi (ed.), *La scoperta dei selvaggi. Antropologia e colonialismo da Colombo a Diderot* (Milan: Principato Editore, 1971) and Stefano Landucci, *I filosofi e i selvaggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014 [1972]).

[35] On Jesi's compositional method see Andrea Cavalletti, 'La maniera compositiva di Furio Jesi', in Jesi, *Materiali mitologici*, op. cit.

cultural ruin, though one which is able to form, in the eye of the epistemologist, *the rose*'.[36] In the specific case of *La festa*, Jesi's aim was to make evident how 'a traditional seam – composite but traceable back to some fundamental common elements – within the so-called social sciences bound to bourgeois culture is ultimately incapable of attaining a knowability of the festival that is not the mere recognition of the unknowability of the festival'.[37] What role does the savage play in this vexed matter of knowability?

Jesi's starting point here, by analogy with a position he already articulates regarding myth in his writings on Kerényi,[38] is that modernity is marked by a caesura with the festive: we enjoy 'no historical relationship – which is not that of the mere, partial and precarious, observation of the *different* (*diversi*) – with the "sense of festivity"', and can at most grasp the 'cruel festival' that makes itself felt in the 'collective experience of violence and pain'.[39] In this predicament, the ethnologist – even or especially when he is an ethnologist of his own modern tribe, as in Jesi's example of Marcel Proust – necessarily become a kind of spy, who aims to become visible in the eyes of the 'different' (*diversi*) 'as an other [*diverso*] who nevertheless feigns to be an equal and who can be accepted in his fiction'.[40] But the ethnologist's externality to the festivals of the other means that he is a spy in a *mise-en-scène* of his own making and in that sphere

> the only material which is autonomous from the organizing/spying of the ethnologist is the difference of the *different* [*la diversità dei diversi*]: the fact that the different are objectively susceptible to being spied upon. Difference and the being able to be spied upon [*spiabilità*] of the different are one and the same thing. One can in fact only spy the *different*. It is impossible to penetrate incognito into the sphere of the equal or the same without being recognised. Which also means that it is impossible to spy from a hidden position one's own I and what is identical to it.[41]

As Jesi goes on to argue, if ethnology and anthropology are also, consciously or otherwise, an inquiry into the relation between the ego and its equals via the detour of the different – so that the different play the role of *counterparts* – then the ethnographic scene of the festival plays the crucial role of presenting the other, *the savage*, in the maximum density of its difference. Here Jesi underscores a kind of paradox of the anthropology of the savage, namely a kind of universalist epistemology – one which is of course not incompatible with the racial

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[36] Furio Jesi (ed.), *La festa. Antropologia etnologia folklore* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1977), 3. The theme of the ruin (*maceria*) is key to Jesi's reading of Pound, see 'Parodia e mito nella poesia di Ezra Pound', in *Letteratura e mito*, 200, 207. But see also the final essay in the same collection of essays, 'L'esperienza religiosa di Apuleio', in which Jesi writes of the 'hour of the crisis of classical culture' as the perennially lasting instant in which 'the symbol reveals itself as the ruin of the past or the future' (240-1).

[37] *La festa*, 3.

[38] See the first three essays in *Materiali mitologici*, 3-80.

[39] I quote 'Conoscibilità della festa' here from its most recent and available edition: *Il tempo della festa*, 65. See also the important observation on how the impossibility of the festival leads cultural nostalgia to mistake the collective experience of pain for the true, if negative, festival (66). Jesi sees this misunderstanding still at work in some contemporary anthropological literature, for instance, in what he sees as Roger Caillois 'equivocal middle path between ethnographic observation and the exegesis of a *different* (*diversa*) society' (67). He goes on to note Horkheimer and Adorno's use of Caillois in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and the latter's resonance with what he sardonically refers to as 'the savages that the Freud of *Totem und Tabu* paraded through the streets of Vienna' (69).

[40] *Il tempo della festa*, 76.

[41] *Il tempo della festa*, 77.

machinery identified elsewhere, and for which the maximum of difference can also turn into a maximum of humanity:

> precisely because the festival is the acme of [the savages'] human peculiarity, in the festival state they possess and exhibit also the maximum density, the maximum concentration, of their universal humanity. They are thus, exceptionally, 'men like everyone else' in the very moment in which they are more *different* than ever. Humanity in its maximum concentration coincides paradoxically with the acme of difference.[42]

By way of a further, and related, paradox, the festival thus construed also permits the ethnologist or anthropologist to approximate a collective experience that otherwise seems to be impossible with his 'equals', equals who are no longer such in a society in which the only festivals are cruel and catastrophic. The construction of the festival in the 'bourgeois culture' of the anthropologist thus reveals its 'unknowability'; it is not an immersion of the equal or same into the scene and field of the other and different, but rather 'a situation into which the ethnologist lowers the *different* in order to make use of them with the aim of recovering in them both solidarity with his fellows and his own liberation from solidarity with his ego'.[43] It is on the basis of this incisive critique of the epistemology of anthropology, and the politics and subjectivity of ethnography, that Jesi can sketch his model of the *anthropological machine*, which he defines as follows:

> the complex mechanism that produces images of men, anthropological models, referred to the ego and others, with all the possible varieties of *difference* [*diversita*] (that is of extraneousness from the ego). These models can be rationally appreciated, while what cannot be is what should be at the heart of the machine, its unmoved motor: man, who can be an ego or an other, and who instead is an other even when he is an ego. All the innumerable *others* [*altri*], whose epistemological [*gnoseologici*] models originate in the anthropological machine – in other words, all the images of man that man can know – can be either the epiphanies of *true* man (independently from the fact of being known: therefore of real man in and for himself, of the symbol resting within itself of universal man), which would be found within the machine and with its presence would make it function and produce, or the result of the production of the *empty* machine. Uncertainty as to whether the anthropological machine is empty or full, as to whether it possess an internal unmoved prime mover, derives from the impenetrability of the walls of the machine itself. This impenetrability is a postulate that stands as a *conditio sine qua non* of the epistemological usability of the model 'anthropological machine'.[44]

In the specific case of the 'savage' festival, the anthropological machine, with its inscrutable engine and relentless productivity, operates in and through the coexistence of two hypotheses, namely that (1) 'from the sphere of the *different* there proceeds a movement towards the observer (a movement crystallised in the festival)' and (2) that the observer carried out 'an operation of exploitation of the *different* (through their lowering into the festive state)' – a coexistence that, as Jesi notes, is particularly evident in the writings of explicitly racist colonial operators, but which is also perceivable in the work of non- or anti-colonialist anthropologists.[45] Most significantly, as the anthology of writings goes on to expose through its method of composition (in extracts from André Thevet, Joseph-François Lafitau, Sigfrid Rafael Karsten, Josef Haekel), the two hypotheses generated by the

[42] *Il tempo della festa*, 78.
[43] *Il tempo della festa*, 80.
[44] *Il tempo della festa*, 82.
[45] *Il tempo della festa*, 84.

anthropological machine vis-à-vis the festival divide themselves into the categorisation of two types of exceptional collective ritual, namely the *peaceful festival*, understood as a 'virtuous collective experience', the 'periodic suspension of duty and representation', and the *warrior festival*. It is in the latter that we see the anthropologist reproducing, in his own projection onto the 'savage' scene, the hierarchies of civilisation we had already encountered in Jesi's project on the ignoble savage:

> That collectivity, in a state of 'savage' warrior festivity, further allows the ethnologist to split or double his ego: 'I' is another, because it is absorbed in the fullness of the universally human, of the human mass in solidarity grasped at the zenith of its ferocity – and thus in a state of radical *difference* [*diversità*] from the 'civilised' being of the ethnologist. In the 'I' of the ethnologist there is the 'I' of the 'savage': the ethnologist can observe him with detachment, can separate himself from him, because the ethnologist is 'civilised'. 'Civilised' is the gaze of the observer, 'savage' is the ego of the observer. The difference between the ego and the gaze is all the more severe to the extent that the 'I' shows itself as 'savage' in relation to what stands as the touchstone of civilisation: the ought [*il dover essere*] and representation.[46]

This passage, which we would need to complement with an exploration of the central role of time in Jesi's conception of the festival (and which also relates to that particular modern 'festival' that was the Spartacist revolt, between cruel disaster and 'virtuous collective experience'), is particularly significant because it adds, to the investigation of the racial machinery of difference in the outline for *Il cattivo selvaggio*, a sense of the deeper epistemological and subjective structures at work in the figuration of the 'savage' as a model of alterity. But the essay on the 'Knowability of the Festival' is especially important for our purposes because it intimately ties the political perspective of Jesi's studies of racism (his solidarity with what he provocatively calls 'movements of barbarism against civilisation') with the complex epistemological and methodological reflections that govern the project of *La festa*, along with so much of his work on the mythological and anthropological machine. This nexus of politics and epistemology is articulated in the conclusion of the essay in a manner perhaps unmatched in the rest of Jesi's corpus.

Jesi, continuing that preoccupation with temporality which, as we just noted, is so critical to this period of his work, and prolonging the essay's preoccupation with 'festive time', reframes the problem of anthropological difference in terms of the everyday (*il quotidiano*), telling us that in the 'instant' when the latter is unveiled it turns into the *different* (*il diverso*): 'man, in the instant in which he appears in the festive state, is the *different*. The everyday in the phase of its occultation and man in the non-festive state are the known (*il noto*) and the same (*l'uguale*)' – while the ethnologist or anthropologist cannot unveil himself, and accordingly cannot appear to himself in the festive state. The condition of the anthropologist – which prolongs the reflections on the mythologist's distance from myth that already govern Jesi's wrestling Kerényi – is marked thus by the 'lack of epiphanic experiences', by the fact that the anthropologist can only operate on 'machines', on functioning epistemological models like the mythological machine and the anthropological machine whose core, or 'mover' is inaccessible (in its plenitude or void).[47] This enigma at the heart of the machines, Jesi notes, may constitute their greatest cunning, what allows them to conserve or reproduce the very structures of social domination that permit them to operate. Perhaps, Jesi muses, this

[46] *Il tempo della festa*, 91.
[47] *Il tempo della festa*, 104-5.

insistent allusion to an inaccessible core (myth, man) is a way to allow a supposed disenchantment or scepticism *de facto* to believe only in the machines themselves (mythology not myth, anthropology not man, we could say). Now, contrary to the suggestion one might project onto Jesi – namely that what is required is a metaphysical effort to disactivate the machines themselves – 'Knowability of the Festival' ends on very different counsel. What demands to be destroyed are not the machines as such – which, Jesi pointedly notes, would reform like so many hydra's heads – but 'the situation that makes machines true and productive. The possibility of this destruction is exclusively political'.[48] As he continues:

> To destroy the situation that makes true and productive the machines – the 'anthropological machine', the 'mythological machine' – means, moreover, to push beyond bourgeois culture, not merely to try to slightly deform its frontier barriers.[49]

Echoing Jesi, we could say such an intuition is all the more relevant for those who today, drawing inspiration from his work, might seek to dismantle the racialising machine that has the figure of the savage as one of its enduring operators.

[48] *Il tempo della festa*, 106. This emphasis on a political rather than ideological or metaphysical destruction – an important counter to a potentially 'idealist' reading of Jesi's work – is also evident in the essay's final lines: 'The epistemological [*gnoseologico*] problem cannot be isolated, makde autonomous, separated from the political and social problem: a greater degree of knowability of the festival can be a good or an evil only within a framework in which (and not 'to the degree that') one can concretely experience the good or evil of an increased possibility for festive experience in the context of a different society' (108).

[49] *Il tempo della festa*, 107.