

## 5.I Furio Jesi and the Culture of the Right

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On the night of June 16, 1980, Furio Jesi, Italian scholar, critic, poet, novelist, actor and political activist, died in his home, suffocated by an accidental gas leak from the water heater.<sup>1</sup> He had turned thirty-nine only a month before, but his curriculum vitae was already long enough for several people twice his age: he had written nearly twenty monographs on subjects including Egyptology, mythology, German literature, and Hebrew mysticism, as well as newspaper articles, novels, translations, poetry, and a spate of unpublished manuscripts. In 1979, typically, he had produced two books, *Materiali mitologici* (*Mythological Materials: Myth and Anthropology in Central European Culture*) and *Cultura di destra* (*Right-wing Culture*), a study focused on the twentieth century, with special emphasis on Italy. Republished in 2011 with the encouragement of the Wu Ming writer's cooperative, *Cultura di destra* has lost none of its originality. And though Furio Jesi may have died when Silvio Berlusconi was no more than an aspiring tycoon in the Milanese provinces, many of his observations about the connection between middle-class culture, pulp culture and right-wing culture still apply three decades later, with Berlusconi himself as a prime example.<sup>2</sup>

*Cultura di destra* used relatively plain language with biting wit at a time when florid rhetoric in a whole spectrum of styles was the norm for left, right, literati, bureaucrats, academics, and terrorists. Photographs of its author, most of them taken in his thirties, almost always show Furio Jesi grinning broadly, long-haired, bearded, cigarette in hand, radiating energy and humor amid a pile of books and papers; in the Sixties, when he was in his twenties, already married and the father of two, he is short-haired, clean-shaven, and deeply serious.

Furio Jesi was a complicated man, with a complicated background. Although his parents belonged to Turin's large Jewish community, he was a nonbeliever and did not practice religion of any kind. Furthermore, his father, Bruno, had been granted honorary Aryan status for heroic service as a Fascist cavalry officer in Ethiopia in World War II.<sup>3</sup> In 1943, when Furio was two, Bruno Jesi died of the

injuries he had sustained in combat in Africa.<sup>4</sup> The boy grew up with his mother, Vanna Chiron, an art historian, and his maternal aunt and uncle, in a house filled with books, artworks, and archeological artifacts.<sup>5</sup> The setting ensured that he was both prodigiously well read and prodigiously precocious. By the time Furio Jesi reached his teens, he had begun to publish scholarly articles; he completed his first book, *Tales and Legends of Ancient Rome*, at the age of fifteen, and his second, *Egyptian Pottery*, at seventeen.<sup>6</sup> He abandoned formal schooling before finishing the *liceo* and traveled instead. After time spent as a researcher in Brussels and Hildesheim, he returned to Turin in 1969, where he combined editorial work with journalism, theater, and activity on behalf of the Communist labor union, the CGIL. His publications on German culture and his translations of German authors earned him a professorship of German at the University of Palermo in 1976, and then a chair in the same field at the University of Genoa in 1979. Disillusioned with the pressures of city life (at a moment when Italian cities were literal battlegrounds between left and right), he and his family withdrew to live in the countryside outside Genoa, and it was in this rural refuge that he died unexpectedly of carbon monoxide poisoning on a summer night in 1980.

Myth, culture, and anthropology were recurrent keywords in Jesi's writing, as they were in the writing of many of his contemporaries; these were words that captured the *Zeitgeist*. So did the word 'politics', in all its ramifications. But Jesi ultimately came to mistrust large words of indefinable content, and *Cultura di destra* presents the most sustained evidence for that mistrust. Although he does not explicitly address the paradox, Jesi seems to be perfectly conscious that the words 'Cultura' and 'destra' themselves ran the risk of being large, empty abstractions.

Despite his bourgeois background and upbringing in Piedmont, the most historically bourgeois of Italy's regions, Jesi's own political convictions leaned powerfully leftward, at the moment in Italian history that would later be known as the *anni di piombo* (Years of Lead); lead for their distance from any glimmer of a Golden Age, lead for the bullets that flew so freely in every direction from left, right, Mafia, and central state, lead for the weight of gray despair that had followed so brutally on Italy's hopeful prosperity of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> *Cultura di destra* arrived in bookshops shortly after one of the defining events of those leaden years, the kidnapping, fifty-five-day imprisonment, and murder of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro at the hands of the radically left-wing Red Brigades in the spring of 1978.<sup>8</sup> But the author of Italy's first sustained study of rightist culture did not live to see the most dramatic gesture ascribed to Italy's radical right. Two months after Jesi's death, on August 2, 1980, a bomb would rip through Bologna's central train station, killing eighty-three people.<sup>9</sup> Two members of a group called the Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari were eventually sentenced to life imprisonment for that atrocity.<sup>10</sup> But there had been earlier random bombings over the course of more

than a decade, all of them aimed to kill and injure civilians, most of them to this day never formally ascribed to a perpetrator, though the impetus evidently came from the right.<sup>11</sup> There had been left-wing fire-bombings as well: the most terrible killed two brothers in a working-class Roman suburb when their apartment was set on fire one April night in 1973; their father served as secretary for a local section of the neo-Fascist MSI. As neighbors, family, and firefighters watched, twenty-two-year-old Virgilio Mattei burned to death at a window in a desperate attempt to shield his ten-year-old brother Stefano from the flames.<sup>12</sup> Another left-wing bomb in 1978 scarred a future president of Italy's parliament, Gianfranco Fini.<sup>13</sup> For a country still traumatized by its memories of World War II, this near civil war between left and right in the 'Years of Lead' not only revived old hostilities, it also pulled the conflict into a new generation, a generation of young people who often seemed to be at war with their elders as much as with traditional political adversaries. It was in the middle of this terrifying new world of old battles that Furio Jesi published the last and most controversial of his many books.

The title *Cultura di destra* played knowingly on the ambiguity of the term 'culture'. In its short, dense chapters, Jesi dealt both with culture in the anthropological sense (what the American archeologist Lewis Binford had then begun to call 'lifeways' with reference to prehistoric peoples) and culture in the more restricted fine-arts sense implicit, for example, in institutions like the national Ministry of Archaeological and Cultural Property.<sup>14</sup> Jesi defined rightist culture as a culture of 'ideas without words' (a phrase drawn from Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*), abstractions so overused that they had lost their meaning: Myth, Fatherland, Jack the Ripper – the anecdotal inclusion of the Victorian serial killer in a list of lofty principles is a typical Jesi touch. But Jack, as he points out, is an unknown and therefore has an unknown meaning, as inherently empty a phrase as 'patriotism' – or, though Jesi does not say so explicitly, 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>15</sup> He does warn his readers, however, that left and right are not always so easy to distinguish, no matter how polarized postwar Italy seemed to be by the battle between Fascists and Communists:

Most of the cultural heritage, even of those who have no desire to be on the right, is a cultural residue of the right. In past centuries, the culture that has been preserved and transmitted is above all the culture of the wealthy and powerful, or more accurately, it has not been, except minimally, the culture of the weak and poor. It is useless and irrational to be scandalized by the presence of these residues, but it is also necessary to try to find out where they come from. [...] Left-wing speech is dense with 'ideas without words', including the most incendiary left, and in this respect it is related to its institutional adversaries.<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, Jesi shows both his left-wing sympathies (history has seldom been written by the weak and the poor) and his growing skepticism about all mass movements ('Left-wing speech is dense with "ideas without words"'). As a younger man, he was more certain of his convictions. In 1968, at the age of twenty-six, he broke off a four-year friendship with the older Hungarian scholar Karl Kerenyi when Kerenyi reproved him for simplifying his arguments in a typical 'Italo-Communist' fashion; Jesi's bristling reply, to a man who had lived through the Communist occupation of Hungary, never received an answer.<sup>17</sup> The young man had caught the older man's point: that Jesi's thinking was clever but immature, and he reacted by growing up. Although they never corresponded again, Furio Jesi delivered the eulogy at Kerenyi's funeral in 1974.<sup>18</sup>

In the ensuing quarter century, scholars have done precisely what Jesi suggests doing in the passage cited above from *Cultura di destra*, namely, devoting their attention to less privileged strata of society, motivated by some of the same concerns he himself expresses in hopes that overlooked voices should be heard at last. This research has shown that on the whole, the poor and weak have usually been just as conservative as the rich and powerful, with the same general tendency to hold fast to whatever has favored their survival in a harsh world. The poor and powerless are not, in fact, inherently leftist, or communist; they are often fiercely attached to their traditional ways, as another Italian scholar of phenomenal erudition, Torinese Jewish heritage, and left-wing convictions had begun to show in these same years. By the time *Cultura di destra* emerged from the press in 1979, Carlo Ginzburg had completed two famous studies of peasant culture in northern Italy: *I benandanti* (1966; translated in English as *The Night Battles*), which argued that a group of northern Italian peasants preserved the remnants of ancient, pre-Christian cults, and *Il formaggio e i vermi* (*The Cheese and the Worms* [1976]), which examined the case of a sixteenth-century Friulian miller named Menocchio, whose smattering of education made him a truly creative thinker about religion and cosmology, and thus brought him to the attention of the Inquisition. Ginzburg derived Menocchio's peculiar ideas about cosmology from peasant myth, passed by 'oral transmission from generation to generation,' and he treated the beliefs of the Benandanti, a group of peasants distinguished by having been born with a caul, as a similar survival of an immemorial culture preserved by the less privileged strata of human society. Although his political and scholarly orientation were, and are, firmly situated on the left, certain aspects of Ginzburg's argument fit comfortably into Jesi's category of *destra*, such as the attempt to root historical phenomena in a kind of folk mythology, not to mention the peasants' inclination to preserve immemorial custom, conservative in the most genuine sense of the word. This tendency to loose inclusiveness is one of the inherent problems with Jesi's use of *destra* as a diagnostic term.

But the problematic nature of the term *destra* runs to more than its inclusiveness. Jesi's warnings about the 'incendiary left' alert his readers to a phenomenon that has become much better documented in the years since his death: there were Italian terrorists who played both sides of the political spectrum, more excited by a life of lawlessness, violence, and peremptory authority than by any specific ideology of right or left.<sup>19</sup> For these individuals, Jesi's description of rightist culture as a compendium of 'ideas without words' and a 'religion of death' applies to the forces that drove both extremes, as well as Italian organized crime. But given the fact that the far-right movements of Fascism and National Socialism began as left-wing socialism, the problem may have more to do with 'right' and 'left' as analytical categories.

For his analysis of the 'religion of death', Jesi found Italian Fascism too involved in theatrical display to provide a good example, too involved, as he writes, with life.<sup>20</sup> He therefore focused his discussion on other Fascist movements in Europe: the German SS, the Spanish Legionaries of Francisco Franco, and the Romanian Iron Guard, where he found his most revealing example in Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian of religion who had held a distinguished professorship at the University of Chicago since the end of World War II. In 1973 Jesi had edited an Italian translation of Eliade's book on yoga, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, for publication.<sup>21</sup>

In 1972, however, a Romanian-language periodical published in Israel, *Toladot*, produced extracts from Eliade's extensive diaries to show that shortly after his return from India in 1931, this famous student of yoga, shamanism, and world religion had become a fervent supporter of the Iron Guard, or Legion of St. Michael, the Romanian paramilitary organization that combined Orthodox Christianity with Fascist authoritarianism.<sup>22</sup> Drawing on this evidence, first in an encyclopedia entry on 'Myth' from 1973, and then, more extensively, in *Cultura di destra*, Jesi showed Eliade as obsessed with an Orthodox Christian version of the 'religion of death'. His discussion in the latter book begins with Eliade's use of a Romanian folktale about Master Manole, a man who cannot build a house until he has immured his wife inside it, in what Eliade himself called a 'foundation sacrifice', a practice that goes back to antiquity, and seems, for example, to be attested in recent excavations of archeological sites like the Roman Forum and Etruscan Tarquinia.<sup>23</sup>

From the idea of foundational sacrifice, Jesi turns to the Iron Guard's rhetoric of sacrifice in battle as a necessary step toward building a new Christian world order and compares this rhetoric with Eliade's own writings about religion and human redemption.

In order to last [Eliade writes], a building must be animated: that is it must receive both a life and a soul. The *transfer* of the soul is not possible except by means of a sacrifice; in other words, by means of a violent death. Like-

wise, sacrifices of human victims are performed to ensure the success of an activity, or the historical duration of a spiritual undertaking.<sup>24</sup>

In journal entries that range from the 1920s to the 1950s, Eliade often wrote about the withdrawal of a Supreme Being from the world, and how religions had been invented to fill the void left by that withdrawal; this is the basic premise of his famous book on shamanism, and of his four-volume *History of Religions*.<sup>25</sup>

From these remarks Jesi argues that in the final analysis the Jews, as the chosen people of God, provided the Iron Guard and the National Socialists with the perfect foundation sacrifice for their religion of death. Yet the very idea of God's withdrawal, Jesi notes, is also fundamental to early modern Jewish mysticism; he notes that Eliade even applies the Kabbalistic term *tzimtzum*, 'withdrawal' or 'contraction' to this phenomenon of God's departure:

Eliade says, 'Myths and "religions" [...] are the result of the void left in the world because of God's withdrawal'. The Kabbalah [of Isaac Luria] affirms that 'God, in order to guarantee the possibility of the world's existence, needed to create a place that was emptied of his being, from which He therefore withdrew himself'.<sup>26</sup>

Jesi here suggests, in short, that Eliade has taken his scheme of divine withdrawal, ultimately to be compensated by the Holocaust, from a Jewish source. Like his exchanges with Kerenyi a decade earlier, his exposition of Eliade seems to reveal enthusiastic admiration for an elder scholar that has turned to disillusionment, expressed along narrowly defined political lines, but also reflective of something larger. Jesi suggested more than once that all scholarly work was autobiographical, and in these troubled relationships with scholarly father figures, admired and then viewed critically as rightists, it is not hard to see the Jewish father who is Fascist, Aryan, and as absent from his son's life as the God who has withdrawn from the world by contracting into himself.

Jesi was not the only follower of Eliade to struggle with this legacy. The assertions of *Cultura di destra* greatly upset both the elder historian himself and his international following, especially the Romanian student of religion who eventually followed Eliade to Chicago and became his literary executor, Ioan Culianu.<sup>27</sup> In 1987, a year after Eliade's death, Culianu confided to a colleague that his mentor 'had never been an anti-Semite, or a member of the Iron Guard, or a pro-Nazi. But I understand anyway that he was closer to the I[ron] G[uard] than I might have liked to think'.<sup>28</sup> Culianu's mysterious assassination on the University of Chicago campus in 1991 further complicated reaching any clear assessment of Eliade's legacy by removing his most evident intellectual heir.<sup>29</sup>

It is clear in any case that Eliade was close to the Iron Guard in the late 1930s, whether through naïve patriotism, as Culianu eventually concluded, or through the more complicated mystical impulse that Jesi outlined in *Cultura di destra*. If Jesi himself had lived longer, he may well have analyzed Eliade's career somewhat differently as historical events turned many of his fellow Italian Communists into social democrats. Culianu, somewhat defensively (of both Eliade and himself) explained his mentor's Legionary sympathies by a particular historical situation in Romania; what is particularly compelling about Jesi's account is its immersion in a particular situation within the history of religion, or at least of mysticism, rather than the history of politics.<sup>30</sup>

Jesi's change of heart about Mircea Eliade was not an isolated phenomenon among young historians of religion. At the very same time, the brilliant German classicist Walter Burkert, ten years older than Jesi, was beginning to rethink his own pioneering book on sacrificial ritual, *Homo Necans* (1972).<sup>31</sup> Deeply influenced by the work of an older Swiss scholar, Karl Meuli, and captivated by Meuli's vividly imaginative descriptions of ritual life in prehistoric human society, Burkert had gradually come to realize how extensively those accounts might have reflected Meuli's contemporary political sympathies rather than ancient realities.<sup>32</sup> To a conspicuous extent, in fact, the history of religion in the early to mid-twentieth century was written by scholars who leaned to the political right and helped to create what Jesi would term a 'mythological machine' of prototypes and archetypes – not only Eliade and Meuli, but also figures like the French Indo-Europeanists Georges Dumézil and Émile Benveniste and the American Joseph Campbell.<sup>33</sup> Their students, on the other hand, often came from a completely different political background, like Jesi himself, or Burkert, or the Swede Jesper Svenbro, or the American Gregory Nagy. Not every attitude these historians of religion shared, including the conviction that the world was in a state of decline and the longing for an imagined past, was necessarily political; many of the notoriously cranky Joseph Campbell's most biting statements, for example, were expressions of curmudgeonly temper rather than ideological conviction.

The Eastern European mystical currents that Jesi brought into play in his discussion of European Fascism had already figured largely in another of his books, *Mitologie intorno all'Illuminismo* (1972; *Enlightenment Mythologies*).<sup>34</sup> This volume's title promised to upset the image of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment as a triumph of reason, much as the Irish scholar E.R. Dodds had upset the image of ancient Greece as a paradise of reason with his lectures published as *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1962).<sup>35</sup> In *Mitologie*, Jesi treated, among other themes, the eighteenth-century messianic Jewish movements that followed Shabbatai Zevi and Joseph Frank, figures to whom he returned in *Cultura di destra*. In

one sense, Shabbatai Zevi and Joseph Frank, as Jewish saviors, represented the perfect fulfillment of their contemporaries' hopes for a new order. But rather than immolating themselves as sacrificial victims, Zevi eventually converted to Islam and Frank to Christianity. Jesi tries to explain their actions within his scheme of foundational self-immolation, but it seems more likely that both men were acting out of a practical instinct for self-preservation:

Extensive research has been carried out on Shabbatai Zevi; it turns out that this 'holy sinner' who had presented himself as an 'apostate messiah' committed 'evil acts' but when the inspiration ceased 'he behaved like an entirely ordinary man, and regretted the strange actions he had committed'. In this sense of guilt he made plain the tragedy of his condition: the Law that he broke had to be broken in order to establish the Law of the new kingdom, but it was still *the Law*.<sup>36</sup>

Jesi's discussion of Zevi and Frank comes just after his exposé of Mircea Eliade's sympathies with the Iron Guard, suggesting that on some level he may suspect that Eliade's case, too, is probably impossible to confine within a scheme of sacrificial mysticism, or, for that matter, of consistent human behavior. Eliade, Zevi, and Frank lived in troubled times; so did Furio Jesi, but he was less exposed to physical risk than these three men who changed their beliefs to fit their surroundings.

Clearly, Furio Jesi himself was powerfully attracted to the same histories, myths, and fantasies as the scholars he analyzed. By the time he reached the age of thirty, however, he had begun to see these histories and myths as invented stories rather than archetypal realities, and this skeptical detachment led to another important theme of *Cultura di destra*: the conclusion that myths and historical pasts had been invented *ex post facto* by people who needed such stories to justify their own actions or their own position in the world. Like his elder contemporary Walter Burkert, Furio Jesi was beginning to face the full extent to which the remote past was simply unknowable.

Furthermore, as a nonbeliever in matters of religion, he had also come to disbelieve in myth *per se* – in good left-wing materialist fashion, he began to write about 'mythological materials', a phrase that also appears in the title of his penultimate book, published a few months before *Cultura di destra*. For the forgers of rightist culture, he would argue in a 1979 interview, 'ideas without words' and 'mythological materials' provided 'a kind of homogenized pulp that can be modeled and held to a shape in the most expedient way'.<sup>37</sup>

When Jesi traced the fate of 'ideas without words' in Italian popular culture, he did so as a pioneer. The second long essay of *Cultura di destra* examines Italian

neo-Fascism in an effort to understand the ideology of right-wing terrorism (one year before the crowning act of right-wing terrorism in Italy, the bombing of the Bologna train station). Jesi notes first that Italian Fascism is distinctive because the persistence of the Catholic Church and the aristocracy have resulted in a relatively small middle class, which is largely secular and liberal in its attitudes rather than taken by mystical or occult movements:

The modern Italian bourgeoisie, especially the petit and middling bourgeoisie, has never had a particular propensity for esoterica and Knights of the Holy Grail. A bit of occultism – but in small doses and certainly much smaller than those absorbed, for example, by the German or French bourgeoisie – a bit of Freemasonry (and that not for the petit bourgeoisie), but this, too, secularized often as not, is much more anticlerical, liberal, and inspired by Unification rather than by ‘secret centers’.

Within his contemporary Italian context, Jesi identifies two kinds of neo-Fascism: ‘fierce-faced Fascism’ and ‘Fascism in a suit’, the former typical of the 1970s heirs of the violent, black-shirted *squadristi* who brought Mussolini to power, and the latter their more socially acceptable sympathizers, who combined two categories invidious to Jesi’s own political stance: Fascist and bourgeois.<sup>38</sup> Jesi warns his readers, however, that these two categories of neo-Fascist are interchangeable: the mildest of Fascists-in-a-suit still keeps a black leather jacket in his closet (as a later Minister of Justice in Silvio Berlusconi’s ‘center-right’ governments, former MSI member Ignazio La Russa, would demonstrate by his sartorial choices in office and out).

Typical of Italian Fascism, Jesi argues, is the figure of Julius Evola, the ideo-logue both for Mussolini and for postwar neo-Fascism:

Julius Evola is a person with whom no one as yet has reckoned thoroughly. It is not enough, in fact, to declare him so filthy a racist that it is revolting to touch him (which is true) and so jejune that it is a waste of time paying attention to him (which is not true). But [...] to examine him as a significant cultural personality does not at all mean ascribing to him merits and stature of any consequence.<sup>39</sup>

Evola wrote in a visionary vein, but the real soul of Italian Fascism and its later successor, Jesi argues, is to be found in popular culture (it was Mussolini, after all, who created a Ministry of Popular Culture, the notorious ‘Minculpop’). He discusses openly Fascist writers like the eccentric, flamboyant Gabriele D’Annunzio, and compares D’Annunzio’s eroticism and hothouse prose with that of the pop-

ular romance novelist Amalia Liana Negretti Odescalchi Cambiasi, to whom D'Annunzio himself suggested the pen name Liala 'so that she would always have a wing (*ala*) in her name' – the aristocratic Liala's long-time lover was an aviator killed in 1926.

Despite her own noble origins, Liala was overwhelmingly popular with women of every class, who felt that she 'spoke to them in their own language'. Jesi attacks that apparent fellow-felling relentlessly. Liala's romances, obsessed with the minute description of interior decor, boats, airplanes, clothing, and fast cars, were written, he contended, in a language:

that does not ask to be 'understood' in any sense, if 'understand' implies any sort of exercise of reason. It is the language of package vacations organized by those in power for those who lack it, so that the vacation will mean the cessation of all effort.<sup>40</sup>

Jesi also devoted a sardonic paragraph of his analysis of luxury to the man he called the 'little marquis (*marchesino*) of racing cars', by whom he meant Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, the future head of Ferrari, whose vanity the rumpled scholar captured mercilessly.<sup>41</sup> (Jesi's right-wing adversaries borrowed the term *marchesino* immediately to describe Communist leader Enrico Berlinguer, who was, in fact, a Sardinian aristocrat.)

Liala, Jesi notes, dwells on the icons, the 'ideas without words' that denote luxury (a word that means both 'luxury' and 'lust' in Italian), by dwelling lovingly on the physical trappings of a wealth that most of her readers would never enjoy. Until the later stages of her career, when changing sexual mores changed the plots of romance novels, she also devoted extensive space in her novels to the preservation of female virginity (Liala lived from 1897 to 1985). Through the same emphasis on extravagant consumption, the same appeal to the desire for the physical trappings of what would soon be called *benessere*, 'well-being' (but meaning luxury), Silvio Berlusconi would soon create his own *cultura di destra*, first in the media and then in politics.

Clearly, on some level Jesi acknowledged the overwhelmingly visual emphasis of Fascist culture, but did so without using his own experience in art, archeology and art history to develop an argument about visual media and 'ideas without words' – for this still young, and inveterately bookish man, *Cultura* continued to mean literary culture.

Thus Jesi misses some of the importance of Giorgio Almirante, the charismatic head of the MSI, the postwar heir to the Fascist Party. The son of two actors, Almirante used his face and gestures as a medium in the way that Mussolini had before him. But Almirante's physicality was not simply a matter of empty 'ideas

without words': often, he let his presence speak on his behalf in a way that gave him enormous authority with his rank and file. When he appeared at the funeral of Communist Party secretary Enrico Berlinguer, his meaning was perfectly clear right across the political spectrum.<sup>42</sup>

Some of Almirante's followers caught on to this aspect of his conduct. In his study of gentrification in a Roman working-class neighborhood, anthropologist Michael Herzfeld noticed that the people who were physically present to protect the long-time residents from pressures to move and eviction notices belonged to Alleanza Nazionale, the party that succeeded Almirante's MSI and renounced Fascism for a position they defined as center-right; whereas former Communists, become eager capitalists, were driving the process of gentrification as eagerly as more traditional, business-minded conservatives.<sup>43</sup>

Inspired though it may have been by a certain amount of standard Communist rhetoric about the perils of capitalism, Jesi's picture of an Italy lulled into thoughtlessness by the obsessive, empty-minded consumption of luxuries and empty symbols seems as apposite in the sunset years of Silvio Berlusconi as it did in the 'Years of Lead', no longer quite 'Fascism in a suit' but an evident descendant of the 'luxurious' branch of the same rightist culture.

Jesi also evokes a terrifying vision of the right-wing sage, but it is really the picture of any self-styled authority, and a warning to himself as much as to his readers:

The sage [*saggio*] is the author of an essay [*saggio*]; mythological masks that he adopts and outcomes to which he is exposed, mythological materials that he manages and outcomes he claims to have sensed in advance, at the same time become myths and outcomes that envelop his work. He runs the risk, by assuming that mask and managing those materials, of identifying himself with his knowledge-by-composition to the point that he falls headlong, before his own May 5 [the date of Napoleon's death in exile], into a 'There has never been anyone like Napoleon'. But he also believes that he has been offered the opportunity to wear down, by a procedure related to Romantic irony or Jewish assimilationism, mechanisms and materials, museum pieces, that he promises to himself that he will reduce, by consuming them, under the stimulus of his own inspiration, to a transparency sufficient to counterbalance the opaque density he has conferred on his own face by assuming the features of a pundit.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, the only moving image to survive of Furio Jesi is a brief appearance in a television documentary by Ferdinand Braudel on the meaning of Europe. Here, Jesi, long-haired and bearded, appears through the fog of the Po Valley,

crunching his way across a snowy field, wrapped in a shaggy lambskin coat with a broad collar, talking about the myth of Europa and Mediterranean solar cults. The ice and fog make him mysterious and remote, though his voice is warm and his way of speaking is ironic and conversational. Is he opaque or transparent, scholar or prophet? He is certainly an artist.

In many ways, *Cultura di destra* represents Furio Jesi's coming of age as a scholar; in this, his last book, he succeeds in putting his vast trove of knowledge into a series of coherent patterns, without denying the complexity and mutability of individual human beings, or of their society. Unlike Burkert, he did not live long enough to rethink his own ideas, and to some extent they remain bound to his own time and the black-and-white contrasts of early, schematic formulations. Italian politics, in those days, was divided into three broad categories. Just over half the country's population tended to favor conservative and Catholic positions, but a substantial minority, about one-third of the citizenry, favored a strictly secular socialist or social-democratic state. After the eclipse of Fascism at the end of World War II, these two positions solidified in the Christian Democratic Party (DC), working in overt concert with the Roman Catholic Church, and the Italian Communist Party (PCI), insistent on its independence but strongly tied to the Soviet Union. A smaller contingent, some twenty percent, maintained its Fascist loyalties, crystallized in the Italian Social Movement (MSI). All these parties dissolved abruptly in the early 1990s, but the people involved have gone away much more slowly, and so have their basic conflicts.

But there are also differences between today's Italy and the Italy of *Cultura di destra*. Culture in the 1970s, in any sense of that word, was still largely a face-to-face activity, from the smoke-filled cinema clubs to street theater to opera; television was state-run, in black and white, but capable, like radio, of extraordinary quality.<sup>45</sup> Contacts were physical rather than virtual, including the constant clashes of right and left on Italian streets. Large segments of the official state apparatus were still shot through with Fascist sympathizers; this is why it has proven so difficult to prosecute right-wing terrorists and why an Italian military court could refuse to prosecute the Nazi war criminal Erich Priebke as late as 1996. At the same time, to please the Roman Church and the United States, Communists continued to be categorically excluded from government.<sup>46</sup> The grip of the Christian Democratic Party on Italy seemed destined to last *in saecula saeculorum*.

It all changed, of course, and sometimes with startling rapidity. The Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists came down in a hail of corruption charges in 1992 and 1993, the old Fascists died and the one-time Communists turned into Democrats of the Left, then simply

Democrats, and took the roles once denied to them: Prime Minister, Senator, Deputy, President of Italy. Former neo-Fascists from the MSI followed suit, holding offices like President of Parliament and Mayor of Rome. Between 1992 and 2012, a perpetually smiling little plutocrat named Silvio Berlusconi bought the right wing of the Italian political system with a combination of money, television, newspapers, and a constant cry of anti-Communism.<sup>47</sup> The Polish cardinal who had just been elected pope when Jesi died, John Paul II, would reign for another quarter century, ushering in a new Catholic *cultura di destra* that fostered secretive, ideological organizations like Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ at the expense of more traditional religious orders, most notably the Jesuits. (Now changing again with the election of the Jesuit Pope Francis I.)

Yet *Cultura di destra* still provides a trenchant analysis of many phenomena in today's Italy, its hard-core right, its Catholic right, and its center right, of which there are, by now, several different manifestations, even though the spirit of Jesi's enterprise remains very much the spirit of the late 1970s.

That spirit emerges on film as vividly as it does in the written word, and not only in Jesi's spectral appearance in the snow. In the sodden October of 1978, as the young author put the finishing touches on *Cultura di destra*, the English film director Joseph Losey began to shoot a cinematic version of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Vicenza near Venice, amid the buildings of the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio.<sup>48</sup> One of the first images in the film, which came out in the spring of 1979, is a quotation from the *Prison Diaries* of Italian Communist leader Antonio Gramsci: 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'.<sup>49</sup> Gramsci was referring to the beginnings of Fascism; for Losey, who had collided with McCarthyism in the United States, the citation was a way of emphasizing the revolutionary qualities of Mozart's opera, the story of a libertine composed and produced in the years between the American and the French Revolutions. Losey's stroke of genius was to sense the same revolutionary vibrations in Palladio's sixteenth-century architecture, which may look placid in plan and photograph, but in real space is strange, disquieting, charged with elemental force.<sup>50</sup> Losey's *Don Giovanni*, Ruggero Raimondi, was born, like Furio Jesi, in 1941, and in many ways his performance embodies the same conflicts, myths, and violent upsets that Jesi explores in his work.<sup>51</sup> Both *Cultura di destra* and *Don Giovanni*, in other words, are sublime creatures of their time, a dreadful time in many ways, but a time that in retrospect seems rooted and real in ways that our virtual world no longer does.

## Notes

- 1 Giovanni Proietti, 'Jesi, Furio', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 62 (2004).
- 2 See, for example, Cesare Medail, 'Che razza di destra?', *Corriere della Sera*, 24 January 1993; Marco Filoni, 'Cos'è la cultura di destra?', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 19 April 2011; Raffaele Liucci, 'L'intellettuale e il suo "colore" politico', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 19 April 2011.
- 3 See Marco Belpoliti and Enrico Manera, *Furio Jesi, Riga* 31 (November) (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2010), 13.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Vanna Chiron, a teacher in the *liceo* and author of books for young adults, eventually married the physicist Gian Carlo Wick and moved to the United States, returning to Turin after Wick's death. For the atmosphere in the Jesi household, see Anna Strumia, 'Omaggio Torinese a Furio Jesi, indagatore disincantato del mito', 25 September 2003, *Bollettino dell'Associazione Ex-Alunni del Liceo Alfieri* (Turin, 2003), 11.
- 6 Furio Jesi and Vanna Chiron, *Racconti e leggende dell'antica Roma* (Turin: Editrice S.A.I.E., 1956); Furio Jesi and Pierre Gilbert, *La ceramica egizia dalle origini al termine dell'età tinita* (Turin: Editrice S.A.I.E., 1958).
- 7 In a vast bibliography, see, for example, Guido Crainz, *Il paese reale: dall'assassinio di Moro all'Italia di oggi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2013); Mario Calabresi, *Spingendo la notte più in là* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007).
- 8 Leonardo Sciascia, *L'affaire Moro* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1978); Sergio Flamigni, *La tela del ragno. Il delitto Moro*, rev. ed. (Milan: Kaos Edizioni, 2003); Richard Drake, *The Aldo Moro Murder Case* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 9 Luca Teles, *Cuori Neri* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2006), 684-700.
- 10 Enrico Deaglio, *Patria, 1978-2008* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2009), 93-94; Crainz, *Il paese reale*, 56-57.
- 11 Crainz, *Il paese reale*, 47-61.
- 12 Teles, *Cuori Neri*, 63-119.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 214-262.
- 14 Lewis R. Binford and Sally R. Binford, *New Perspectives in Archeology* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1968).
- 15 Furio Jesi, *Cultura di destra* (Rome: Garzanti, 1979); new edition, ed. Andrea Cavalletti, *Cultura di destra. Con tre inediti e un'intervista* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2011), 168. See also *ibid.*, 48-49.
- 16 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 26.
- 17 The correspondence was published by Antonio Cavalletti as Furio Jesi-Karl Kerenyi, *Demone e mito. Carteggio 1964-1968* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1999).
- 18 Manera, *Furio Jesi*, 48-54.
- 19 The kidnapping of the Neapolitan Christian Democrat Ciro Cirillo in 1980 eventually involved the far left, the far right, and organized crime in the form of the Nuova Camorra Organizzata of Raffaele Cutolo. Rita Di Giovacchino, *Il libro nero della Prima Repubblica* (Rome: Fazi, 2003), 166-167; Crainz, *Il paese reale*, 119-120.
- 20 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 54.
- 21 Mircea Eliade, *Lo Yoga, immortalità e libertà*, trans. Giorgio Pagliaro, ed. Furio Jesi (Milan: Rizzoli, 1973).
- 22 'Dosarul Mircea Eliade', *Toladot. Buletinul Istitutului Dr. J. Niemirower*, Jerusalem, 1 (January-March 1972), 24-26; presented in Italian in Alfonso Maria Di Nola, 'Mircea

- Eliade e l'antisemitismo', *La rassegna mensile d'Israel*, 43:1-2 (1977), 12-15; *Cultura di destra*, 64-78.
- 23 Andrea Carandini, *Roma il primo giorno* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2009); Maria Bonghi Jovino and Cristina Chiaramonti Trerè, *Tarquinia: Testimonianze archeologiche e ricostruzione storica, scavi sistematici nell'abitato, campagne 1982-1988* (Rome: 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider, 1997).
- 24 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 77.
- 25 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1951] 2004).
- 26 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 71.
- 27 Liviu Bordaş, 'Ioan Petru Culianu, Mircea Eliade, and Felix Culpa', in Mihaela Gligor, ed. *Mircea Eliade between the History of Religions and the Fall into History* (Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2012), 68-178.
- 28 Ioan Culianu, letter to Mac L. Ricketts, May 13, 1987, published in Bordaş, 'Ioan Petru Culianu', 129-130.
- 29 See Ted Anton, *Eros, Magic, and the Murder of Professor Culianu* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).
- 30 Pierre-E. Lacoque, 'Mircea Eliade Remembered', *McGill Journal of Education* 22:2 (1987), 117-130; Marcello De Martino, *Mircea Eliade Esoterico* (Rome: Settimo Sigillo, 2011).
- 31 Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischen Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972).
- 32 Burkert's only analytical study of Meuli is in Japanese. This information comes from a private conversation.
- 33 See, e.g., Carlo Ginzburg, 'Germanic Mythology and Nazism: Thoughts on an Old Book by Georges Dumézil', in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 126-145.
- 34 Furio Jesi, *Mitologie intorno al illuminismo* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1973).
- 35 E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951). See also *idem*, *Missing Persons: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- 36 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 74.
- 37 'Una sorta di pappa omogeneizzata che si può modellare e mantenere in forma nel modo più utile', from an interview in 1979 with *L'Espresso*.
- 38 *Cuori neri*, xi-26 and passim.
- 39 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 142. See also Francesco Cassata, *A destra del fascismo: Profilo politico di Julius Evola* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003).
- 40 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 168.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 176-178.
- 42 *Cuori neri*, xviii.
- 43 Michael Herzfeld, *Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 192-196, 293-302. Herzfeld notes the opportunism of both sides in the debate about gentrification.
- 44 Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, 46.
- 45 Crainz, *Il paese reale*, 24, 195-212.
- 46 See, for example, Richard N. Gardner, *Mission Italy: On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, with a foreword by Zbigniew Brzezinski (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
- 47 Crainz, *Il paese reale*; Enrico Deaglio, *Patria, 1978-2008*; Alexander Stille, *The Sack of Rome: Media + Money + Power = Silvio Berlusconi* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007); Paul Ginsborg, *Berlusconi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003).

- 48 For a discussion of Losey's career, see Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, 'The Lucid Outsider: Joseph Losey', in *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 215-246.
- 49 Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere*, 3, 311. Translation from Zygmunt Bauman, 'Times of Interregnum', *Ethics and Global Politics* 5.1 (2012), 49-56.
- 50 Ingrid D. Rowland, 'The Passions of Palladio', *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2009.
- 51 Giorgio dell'Arti and Massimo Parrini, *Cataologo dei Viventi; 6589 italiani notevoli* (Milan: Marsilio, 2009), available online through *Corriere della Sera* at URL: <http://www.cinquantamila.it/storyTellerThread.php?threadId=RAIMONDI+Ruggero>.