Georges Sorel

Sorel remains an anomalous figure. The other ideologists and prophets of the nineteenth century have been safely docketed and classified. The doctrines, influence, personalities of Mill, Carlyle, Comte, Darwin, Dostoevsky, Wagner, Nietzsche, even Marx, have been safely placed on their respective shelves in the museum of the history of ideas. Sorel remains, as he was in his lifetime, unclassified; claimed and repudiated both by the right and by the left. Was he a bold and brilliant innovator of devastating genius, as his handful of disciples declare? Or a mere romantic journalist, as George Lichtheim calls him? A pessimist 'moaning for blood'[1] in G. D. H. Cole's contemptuous phrase? Or, with Marx, the only original thinker (according to Croce) socialism has ever had? Or a notorious muddle-head, as Lenin unkindly described him? I do not volunteer an answer: I only wish to say something about his principal ideas, and also – to employ that much-abused word – the relevance of these ideas to our time.

I

Georges Sorel was born in 1847 in Cherbourg. His father was an unsuccessful businessman, and the family was forced to practise extreme austerity. According to his cousin, the historian Albert

[1] G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought* (London, 1953–60), vol. 3, *The Second International*, part 1, 387.

Sorel, Georges Sorel early showed exceptional mathematical gifts. In 1865 he became a student at the *École polytechnique* in Paris, and five years later entered the Department of Public Works (*ponts et chaussées*) as an engineer. During the next twenty years he was posted to various provincial towns. During the debacle of 1870 and 1871 he was in Corsica. In 1875 he fell ill in an hotel in Lyon, and was nursed by a servant called Marie David, a devoutly religious, semi-literate peasant from the borders of Savoy, with whom he set up a household. In his letters he refers to her as his wife, but in fact he appears never to have married her, probably out of deference to the wishes of his family, which was evidently shocked by this *mésalliance*. It appears to have been an entirely happy relationship. He taught her, and learnt from her, and, after her death in 1898, wore a sacred image that she had given him, and worshipped her memory for the rest of his days.

Until the age of forty, his life had been that of a typical minor French government official, peaceful, provincial and obscure. In 1889 his first book was published. In 1892, being then forty-five years old, having attained the rank of Chief Engineer and been rewarded with the rank of Chevalier of the *Légion d'honneur*, he suddenly resigned. From this moment his public life began. His mother had left him a small legacy, and this enabled him to move to Paris. He settled in a quiet suburb, Boulogne-sur-Seine, where he lived until his death, thirty years later, in 1922. In 1895 he started to contribute to left-wing journals, and from then on became one of the most controversial political writers in France.

He appeared to have no fixed position. His critics often accused him of pursuing an erratic course: a legitimist in his youth, and still a traditionalist in 1889, he was by 1894 a Marxist. In 1896 he wrote with admiration about Vico. By 1898, influenced by Croce, and also by Eduard Bernstein, he began to criticise Marxism, and at about the same time fell deeply under the spell of Henri Bergson. He was a Dreyfusard in 1899, a revolutionary syndicalist during the following decade. By 1909

he was a sworn enemy of the Dreyfusards, and, in the following two or three years, an ally of the royalists who edited the *Action française*, and a supporter of the mystical nationalism of Barrès. He wrote with admiration about Mussolini's militant socialism in 1912, and in 1919 with still greater admiration about Lenin, ending with whole-hearted support for Bolshevism, and, in the last years of his life, an unconcealed admiration for the Duce.

What credence could be placed in the thought of a man whose political views veered so violently and unpredictably? He did not claim to be consistent. 'I write from day to day', he wrote in 1903 to his faithful correspondent, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, 'following the need of the moment.'[1] Sorel's writings have no shape or system, and he was not impressed by it in those of others. He was a compulsive and passionate talker, and, as is at times the case with famous talkers – Diderot, Coleridge, Herzen, Bakunin – his writings remained episodic, unorganised, unfinished, fragmentary, at best sharp, polemical essays or pamphlets provoked by some immediate occasion, not intended to be fitted into a body of coherent, developed doctrine, and not capable of it. Nevertheless, there is a central thread that connects everything that Sorel wrote and said, if not a doctrine, then an attitude, a position, the expression of a singular temperament, of an unaltering view of life. His ideas, which beat like hailstones against all accepted doctrines and institutions, fascinated both his friends and his opponents, and do so still not only because of their intrinsic quality and power, but because what in his day was confined to small coteries of intellectuals has now grown to worldwide proportions. In his lifetime Sorel was looked on as, at best, a polemical journalist, an autodidact with a powerful pen and occasional flashes of extraordinary insight, too wayward and perverse to claim for long the attention of serious and busy men. In the event, he has proved more formidable than many of the

[1] Letter of 28 April 1903, *La critica* 25 (1927), 372.

respected social thinkers of his day, most of whom he ignored or else regarded with unconcealed disdain.

II

The ideas of every philosopher concerned with human affairs in the end rest on his conception of what man is and can be. To understand such thinkers, it is more important to grasp this central notion or image (which may be implicit, but determines their picture of the world) than even the most forceful arguments with which they defend their views and refute actual and possible objections. Sorel was dominated by one *idée maîtresse*: that man is a creator, fulfilled only when he creates, and not when he passively receives or drifts unresisting with the current. His mind is not a mechanism or organism responsive to stimuli, analysable, describable and predictable by the sciences of man. He is, for Sorel, in the first place, a producer who expresses himself in and through his work, an innovator whose activity alters the material provided by nature, material that he seeks to mould in accordance with an inwardly conceived, spontaneously generated, image or pattern. The productive activity itself brings this pattern to birth and alters it – as it fulfils itself freely, obedient to no law, being conceived as a kind of natural spring of creative energy which can be grasped by inner feeling and not by scientific observation or logical analysis. All other views of what men are, or could be, are fallacious. History shows that men are essentially seekers not of happiness or peace or knowledge or power over others, or salvation in another life – at least these are not men's primary purposes; where they are so, it is because men have degenerated from their true humanity, because education or environment or circumstances have distorted their ideas or character or rendered them impotent or vicious.

Man, at his best, that is, at his most human, seeks in the

first place to fulfil himself, individually and with those close to him, in spontaneous, unhindered creative activity, in work that consists of the imposition of his personality on a recalcitrant environment. Sorel quotes his political enemy Clemenceau as saying: 'Everything that lives, resists.'[1] He believed in this proposition as strongly as he believed in anything in his life. To act and not be acted upon, to choose and not be chosen for, to impose form on the chaos that we find in the world of nature and the world of thought – that is the end of both art and science and belongs to the essence of man as such. He resists every force that seeks to reduce his energy, to rob him of his independence and his dignity, to kill the will, to crush everything in him that struggles for unique self-expression and reduce it to uniformity, impersonality, monotony, and, ultimately, extinction. Man lives fully only in and by his works, not by passive enjoyment or the peace and security that he might find by surrender to external pressures, or habit, or convention, by failure to use for his own freely conceived goals the mechanism of the laws of nature to which he is inevitably subject.

This is, of course, not a new idea. It lies at the heart of the great revolt against rationalism and the Enlightenment, identified particularly with French civilisation, that animated the more extreme German Protestant sects after the Reformation, and which, towards the end of the eighteenth century, took the form of celebrating the primacy of the human will against material forces and calm, rational knowledge alike. This is not the place in which to discuss the origins of romanticism. But one cannot understand Sorel, or the impact of his views, unless one realises that what caused the ferment in his mind was a passionate conviction which he shares with some of the early Romantic writers, that the pursuit of peace or happiness or profit, and concern with power or possessions or social status or a quiet life, is a contemptible

[1] *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908) (Paris, 1972) (hereafter RV), 80.

betrayal of what any man, if he takes thought, knows to be the true end of human life: the attempt to make something worthy of the maker, the effort to be and do something, and to respect such effort in others. The notion of the dignity of labour, of the right to work as opposed to the mere Pauline duty to engage in it, which is at the heart of much modern socialism, springs from this Romantic conception, which German thinkers, notably Herder and Fichte, brought up in earnest Lutheran pietism, impressed upon the European consciousness.

Sorel's violent and lifelong disgust with the life of the Parisian bourgeoisie of his time, in its own way as ferocious as that of Flaubert, with whom temperamentally he has something in common, is bound up with a Jansenist hatred of the twin evils of hedonism and materialism. The opportunism and corruption of French political life in the early years of the Third Republic, together with the sense of national humiliation after 1870, may have been a traumatic experience for him, as for many Frenchmen. But it seems unlikely that he would have felt differently in the greedy and competitive Paris of Louis-Philippe or the plutocratic and pleasure-seeking Paris of the Second Empire. An agonised sense of suffocation in the commercialised, jaunty, insolent, dishonourable, easy-going, cowardly, mindless bourgeois society of the nineteenth century fills the writings of the age: the works of Proudhon, Carlyle, Ibsen, Marx, Baudelaire, Nietzsche, almost the whole of the best-known Russian literature of the time, are one vast indictment of it. This is the tradition to which Sorel belongs from the beginning to the end of his life as a writer. The corruption of public life appears to him to have gone deeper than during the decadence of classical Greece, or the end of the Roman Empire. Parliamentary democracy, with its fraudulence and hypocrisy, appeared to him to be an odious insult to human dignity, a mockery of the proper ends of men. Democratic politics resembled a huge stock exchange in which votes were bought and sold without shame or fear, men were bamboozled

or betrayed by scheming politicians, ruthless bankers, crooked businessmen, *avocasserie* and *écrivasserie*[1] – lawyers, journalists, professors, all scrambling for money, recognition, power, in a world of contemptible fools and cunning knaves, deceivers and deceived, living off the exploited workers 'in a democratic bog' in a Europe 'stupefied by humanitarianism'.[2]

III

The Western tradition of social thought has been sustained by two central doctrines. The first taught that the ultimate causes of human misery, folly and vice were ignorance and mental laziness. Reality, it was held by rationalists from Plato to Comte, is a single, intelligible structure: to understand it and explain it, and to understand one's own nature and place in this structure – this alone can reveal what, in a specific situation, can, and what cannot, be realised. Once the facts and the laws that govern them are known to him, no man, desiring as he does happiness or harmony or wisdom or virtue, can pursue any but the sole correct path to his goal that his knowledge reveals to him. To be a rational, even a normal, human being, is to seek one, or several, of the limited number of the natural ends of human life. Only ignorance of what they are, or of what are the correct means for their attainment, can lead to misery or vice or failure. The scientific or naturalistic version of this doctrine animated the Enlightenment and the forms which it took in the two centuries that followed – until, indeed, our own day. Sorel rejected this entire approach. He saw no reason for believing that the world was a rational harmony, or that man's true perfection depended on understanding of the proper place assigned to him in it by his

[1] ['Quibbling' and 'scribbling'. See Saint-Simon's 'Catéchisme politique des industriels' (1823–4) in *Oeuvres de Saint-Simon & d'Enfantin* (Paris, 1865–78), xxxvii 131–2.]

[2] RV 101.

creator – a personal deity or an impersonal nature. Influenced by both Marx and the half-forgotten Italian thinker, Vico, of whom he was one of the few perceptive readers in the nineteenth century, Sorel believed that all that man possessed he owed to his own unflagging labour. Certainly natural science was a triumph of human effort; but it was not a transcription or map of nature, as the positivists had claimed in the eighteenth century; they, and their modern disciples, were mistaken about this. There were two natures: artificial nature, the nature of science – a system of idealised entities: atoms, electric charges, mass, energy and the like – fictions compounded out of observed uniformities, particularly in regions relatively remote from man's daily concerns, like the contents of the world of astronomy, deliberately adapted to mathematical treatment that enabled men to identify some of the furniture of the universe, and to predict and, indeed, control parts of it. The concepts and categories in terms of which this nature had been constructed were conditioned by human aims: they abstracted from the universe those aspects that were of interest to men and possessed sufficient regularity to make them capable of generalisation. This, of course, was a stupendous achievement, but an achievement of the creative imagination, not an accurate reproduction of the structure of reality, not a map, still less a picture, of what there was. Outside this set of formulae, of imaginary entities and mathematical relationships in terms of which the system was constructed, there was 'natural' nature – the real thing – chaotic, terrifying, compounded of ungovernable forces, against which man had to struggle, which, if he was to survive and create, he had at least in part to subdue; with the help, indeed, of his sciences; but the symmetry, the coherence, were attributes of the first, or artificial nature, the construction of his intellect, something that was not found but made. The assumption that reality was a harmonious whole, a rational structure whose logical necessity is revealed to reason, a marvellously coherent system which a rational being cannot

think or wish to be otherwise and still remain rational, and in which, therefore, it must feel happy and fulfilled – all this is an enormous fallacy. Nature is not a perfect machine, nor an exquisite organism, nor a rational system; it is a savage jungle: science is the art of dealing with it as best we can. When we extend such manipulation to men as well, we degrade and dehumanise them, for men are not objects but subjects of action. If Christianity has taught us anything, it has made us realise that the only thing of absolute value in the universe is the human soul, the only thing that acts, that imagines, that creates, that resists the impersonal forces which work against it and, unless they are resisted, enslave us and ultimately grind us into dust. This is the menace that perpetually hangs over us. Consequently life is a perpetual battle.

To deny this truth is shallow optimism, characteristic of the shallow eighteenth century for which Sorel, like Carlyle, felt a lifelong contempt. The laws of nature are not descriptions, they are, as he came to learn from William James (and perhaps also from Marx), strategic weapons. Croce had taught him that our categories are categories of action, that they alter what we call reality as the purposes of our active selves alter: they do not establish timeless truths as the positivists maintained. 'We consider as matter, or as the base, that which escapes, less or more completely, from our will. The form is rather what corresponds to our freedom.'[1] Systems, theories, unrelated to action, attempting to transcend experience, that which professors and intellectuals are so good at, are only abstractions into which men escape to avoid facing the chaos of reality; scientific (and political) Utopias are compounded out of them; the pseudo-scientific predictions about our future by which such Utopias are bolstered are nothing but modern forms of astrology. When such schemes are applied to human beings they can do dreadful damage. To

[1] 'Osservazioni intorno alla concezione materialista della storia', in *Saggi di critica del marxismo* (Palermo, 1902), 44.

confuse our own constructions and inventions with eternal laws or divine decrees is one of the most fatal delusions of men: this is what had happened in the French Revolution. The confusion of the two natures, the real and the artificial, is bad enough. But the *philosophes* were not, by and large, even genuine scientists: only social and political theorists who talked about science without practising it; the *Encyclopédie* had not improved one's real knowledge or skill. Ideological patter, optimistic journalism about the uses of science, were not science. They only lead to positivism and bureaucracy, *la petite science*; and when theory is ruthlessly applied to human affairs, its result is a fearful despotism. Sorel speaks almost the language of William Blake. The Tree of Knowledge has killed the Tree of Life. Robespierre and the Jacobins were fanatical pedants who tried to reduce human life to rules that seemed to them based on objective truths; the institutions they created crushed spontaneity and invention, enslaved and maimed the creative will of man.

Men, whose essence, for Sorel, is to be active beings, are perpetually menaced by two equally fatal dangers: a Scylla and a Charybdis. Scylla is weariness, the loss of nerve, decadence, when men relax from effort, return to the fleshpots, or else fall into quietism and become the victims of the trickery of the clever operators who destroy all honour, energy, integrity, independence, and substitute the rule of cunning and fraud, the dead hand of bureaucracy, laws that can be turned to their advantage by unscrupulous operators, aided and abetted by an army of experts – prostitutes and lackeys of those in power, or idle entertainers and sycophantic parasites, like Voltaire and Diderot, the 'buffoons of a degenerate aristocracy',[1] bourgeois who aspire to ape the tastes of an idle and pleasure-loving nobility. Charybdis is the despotism of fanatical theorists – 'the bloodthirsty frenzy of an optimist maddened by sudden resistance to his plans',[2] who is

[1] *Les Illusions du progrès* (1908), 5th ed. (Paris, 1947), 133.
[2] RV 14.

ready to butcher the present to create the happiness of the future on its bones. These alternations mark the unhappy eighteenth century.

How are men to be rescued from the horns of this dilemma? Only by moral strength: by the development of new men, fully-formed human beings not obsessed by fear and greed, men who have not had their imagination and emotion fettered by doctrinaires or rotted by intellectuals. Sorel's vision resembled that of Tolstoy and Nietzsche when they were young – of the fullness of life, as it was once lived by the Homeric Greeks, free from the corrosive effect of civilised scepticism and critical questioning. It is not the possession of common ideas, convictions bred by reasoning, that creates true human bonds, but common life and common effort. The true basis of all association is the family, the tribe, the *polis*, in which co-operation is instinctive and spontaneous and does not depend on rules or contracts or invented arrangements. Associations for the sake of profit or utility, resting on some artificial agreement, as the political and economic institutions of the capitalist system plainly do, stifle the sense of common humanity and destroy human dignity by generating a spirit of competitive opportunism. Athens created immortal masterpieces until Socrates came, and spun theories, and played a nefarious part in the disintegration of that closely knit, once heroic, community by sowing doubt and undermining established values which spring from the profoundest and most life-enhancing instincts of men.

Sorel began to write in this fashion when he was still a municipal engineer in Perpignan; his friend Daniel Halévy assures us that he had not then read a line of Nietzsche, whom he later came to admire. But their charge against Socrates is identical. Both Nietzsche and Sorel take the side of his accusers: it was Socrates, and his disciple Plato, arch-intellectuals, who planted the life-destroying seeds that led to the glorification of abstractions, academies, contemplative or critical philosophies,

Utopian schemes, and so to the decline of Greek vitality and Greek genius.

Can decadence be averted? Where is permanent salvation to be sought? There is another ancient doctrine in which men have traditionally sought reassurance: teleology. History, it was thought, would be meaningless – merely a causal sequence, or a chaos of unrelated episodes – if it lacked some ultimate purpose. This was considered unthinkable: reason rejects the notion of a mere collocation of 'brute' facts; there must be advance or growth towards the fulfilment of some goal or pattern; the mind demands some guarantee that, despite all accidents and collapses, the story will have a happy ending; either Providence is leading us towards it in its own inscrutable fashion; or else history is conceived as the self-realisation from stage to stage of the great cosmic spirit of which all men and all their institutions, and perhaps all nature, is the changing and progressive expression. Or, perhaps, it is human reason itself that cannot and will not for ever be frustrated, and must, late or soon, triumph over all obstacles, both external and self-generated, and build a world in which men have become everything that, as rational creatures, they consciously or unconsciously seek to be. In its metaphysical or mystical or secular forms this amalgam of Hebraic faith and Aristotelian metaphysics dominated the ideas of the last three centuries and gave confidence to many who might otherwise have despaired.

These central intellectual traditions to which men have pinned their hopes – the Greek doctrine of salvation by knowledge and the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of history as theodicy – were all but rejected by Sorel. All his life he believed in two absolutes: that of science, and that of morality. Science, even though, or perhaps because, it is a human artifice, enables us to classify, predict, control certain events. The concepts and categories in terms of which science puts its questions may vary with cultural change: the objectivity and reliability of the answers do not. But

it is a weapon, not an ontology, not an analysis of reality. The great machine of science does not yield answers to problems of metaphysics or morality: to reduce the central problems of human life to problems of means, that is, of technology, is not to understand what they are. To regard technical progress as being identical with, or even as a guarantee of, cultural progress, is moral blindness, Sorel devoted a series of essays to demonstrating the absurdity of the idea of general human progress which springs from confusion of technology with life, or of the preposterous claim, first advanced by men of letters in the late seventeenth century, of their inevitable superiority to the ancients. As for theological or metaphysical beliefs in human perfectibility, they are only a pathetic clutching at straws, a refuge of the weak.

Neither science nor history offer comfort: Turgot and Condorcet and their nineteenth-century disciples are poor, deluded optimists who believe that history is on our side; so it will be, but only if we make it so, if we fight the good fight against the oppressors and exploiters, the dreary, life-destroying levellers, the masters and the slaves, and protect the sublime and the heroic against democrats and plutocrats, pedants and philistines.

Sorel has no doubt about what is health, and what is disease, whether in individuals or in societies. The Homeric Greeks lived in the light of values without which a society could not be creative or possess a sense of grandeur. They admired courage, strength, justice, loyalty, sacrifice, above all the struggle itself; freedom for them was not an ideal but a reality: the feeling of successful effort. Then (and this probably comes from Vico) came scepticism, sophistry, ease of life, democracy, individualism, decadence. Greek society disintegrated and was conquered. Rome, too, was once heroic, but it had given in to legalism and the bureaucratisation of life; the late Empire was a cage in which human beings felt stifled.

It was the early Church that had once held high the flag of man. What the early Christians believed is less important than

the intensity of a faith that did not allow the corrosive intellect to penetrate it. Above all, these men refused to compromise. The early Christians could have saved themselves from persecution by coming to terms with the Roman bureaucrats. They preferred faith, integrity and sacrifice. Concessions, Sorel repeats, always, in the end, lead to self-destruction. The only hope lies in ceaseless resistance to forces that seek to weaken what one instinctively knows that one lives by. When the Church triumphed and made its peace with the world, it became infected by it and therefore degenerated: the barbarians were converted to Christianity, but to a worldly Christianity, and so fell into decay.

The heroic Christianity of the martyrs is a defence against the decadent State, but it is itself intrinsically socially destructive. Christians (and Stoics too) are not producers: the Gospels, unlike the Old Testament or Greek literature, are addressed to paupers and anchorites. A society indifferent to riches, content with its daily bread, allows no room for vigorous, creative life. Christianity, like every ideology, like its secular imitation – the Utopian socialism of a later day – 'cut the links between social life and the spirit, sowing everywhere germs of quietism, despair, death'.[1] Too little was accorded to Caesar, too much to the Church – an organisation of consumers, not (in Sorel's sense) of producers. Sorel wishes to return to the firm values of the hardy Judaean peasants or the Greek *polis*, where merely to question them was considered subversive. He is concerned neither with happiness nor salvation: only with the quality of life itself, with what used to be called virtue (which in his case much resembles Renaissance *virtù*). Like the Jansenists, like Kant and the Romantics, he values motive and character, not consequences and success.

The accumulation of public wealth in the hands of priests and monks played its part in the exhaustion and fall of the

[1] *La Ruine du monde antique: conception matérialiste de l'histoire (*Paris, 1902), 37.

Roman West. But after decay there is always hope of a revival: does not Vico speak of a *ricorso*? When one cycle of history has ended in moral weakness and decadence, a new one, barbarian, fresh and simple and pious and strong, begins the story again. Sorel dwells on this with the enthusiasm of Nietzsche. He is fascinated by every example of resolute moral resistance to decay, and consequently by the story of the Church under persecution and of the Church militant; he takes little interest in the Church triumphant. It is in connection with movements of resistance and renewal that he develops (increasingly after falling under the influence of Bergson) the theories of which he became the most famous upholder: of the social myth, of permanent class war, of violence, of the general strike.

Even in the darkest moments of decadence, the social organism develops antibodies to resist the disease – men who will not give in, who will stand up and save the honour of the human race. The dedicated monastic orders, the saints and martyrs who preserved mankind from total contamination by late Roman society – what men today embody such qualities, possess the *virtù* of the great *condottieri* and artists of the Renaissance? There may be something of it in the American men of business, bold, enterprising, creative captains of industry who make their will prevail over nature and other men; but they are tainted by the general corruption of capitalism of which they are the leaders. There was, it seemed to Sorel, only one true body of this kind: those who are saved by work – the workers, the only genuinely creative class of our day. The proletarians, who are not morally caught in the toils of bourgeois life, appear to Sorel heroic, endowed with a natural sense of justice and humanity, morally impregnable, proof against the sophistries and casuistries of the intellectuals.

In the last years of the century, during the united front of the left created by the Dreyfus affair, and perhaps influenced by the reformist socialism of Bernstein in Germany, which seemed to him to be at any rate based on economic realities,

Sorel supported the idea of a political party of the working class. But soon he accepted the position of the syndicalist journalist Lagardelle, in whose journal, *Le Mouvement socialiste*, a good many of his articles appeared, that it is not opinions that truly unite men, for beliefs are a superficial possession, blown about by ideologists who play with words and ideas, and can be shared by men of different social formation who have basically nothing in common with each other. Men are truly made one only by real ties, by the family – the unchanging unit of the moral life, as Proudhon and Le Play had insisted – by martyrdom in a common cause, but above all by working together, by common creation, united resistance to the pressures both of inanimate nature, which provides the workers with their materials, and of their masters, who seek to rob them of the fruits of their toil. The workers are not a party held together by lust for power or even for material goods. They are a social formation, a class. It was the genius of Marx that discovered the true nature of classes defined in terms of their relationship to the productive processes of a society torn, but also driven forward, by conflict between capitalist and proletarian. Sorel never abandoned his belief in Marx, but he used his doctrines selectively.

Sorel derives from Marx (reinforced by his own interpretation of Vico) his conception of man as an active being, born to work and create; from this follows his right to his tools, for they are an extension of his nature. The working tools of our day are machines. Machinery is a social cement more effective, he believes, than even language. All creation is in essence artistic, and the factory should become the vehicle of the social poetry of modern producers. Human history is more than the impersonal story of the evolution of technology. Inventions, discoveries, techniques, the productive process are activities of human beings endowed with minds but, above all, wills. Men's values, their practice, their work, are one dynamic, seamless whole. Sorel follows Vico in insisting that we are not mere victims or spectators of events,

but actors and originators. Marx, too, is appealed to, but he is, at times, too determinist for Sorel, especially in the versions of his more positivist interpreters – Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, men inclined to *la petite science*, like bourgeois economists and sociologists. Social and economic laws are not chains, not a constricting framework, but guidelines to possible action, generated and developed by, and in, action. The future is open. Sorel rejects such determinist phraseology as 'tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results' and the like, of which *Capital* is full. Marxism 'is a doctrine of life good for strong peoples; it reduces ideology to the role of a mere instrument'.[1] History for Sorel is what it was for Hegel, a drama in which men are authors and actors; above all it is a struggle between the forces of vitality and those of decay, activity and passivity, dynamic energy versus cowardice and surrender.

Marx's deepest single insight, for Sorel, is his notion of the class war as the matrix of all social change. Creation is always a struggle: Greek civilisation for Sorel is symbolised by the sculptor who cuts the marble – the resistance of the stone, resistance as such, is essential to the process of creation. In modern factories the struggle is not merely between men – workers – and nature, which provides raw material, but between workers and employers, who seek to extract surplus value by exploiting other men's labour power. In this struggle men, like steel, are refined. Their courage, their self-respect, their solidarity with each other, grow. Their sense of justice develops too, for justice, according to Proudhon (to whom Sorel's debt is greater than even to Marx), is something that springs from the feeling of indignation aroused by the humiliation inflicted on others. What is insulted is what is common to all men – their humanity, which is ours; the insult to human dignity is felt by the offender, by the injured man, and by the third party; this common protest which they all feel within

[1] op. cit. (386/1), 38.

them is the sense of justice and injustice. It is this that united some among the socialists with the liberal bourgeoisie against the chicanery of the Army and the Church during the Dreyfus case, and created Sorel's bond with Charles Péguy, who was never a Marxist but was prepared to work with anyone who did not wish to see France dishonoured by a cynical miscarriage of justice. In 1899 he speaks of the 'admirable ardour' with which the Allemanist workers are marching for 'truth, justice, morality'[1] by the side of Jaurès whom he was soon to attack so violently for lacking these very qualities.

Justice in particular is for Sorel an absolute value, proof against historical change. His conception of it may, as in the case of Kant and Proudhon, be rooted in a severe upbringing. Sorel dreaded sentimental humanitarianism; when people cease to feel horror at human crimes this will, he thinks, mean a collapse of their sense of justice. Better wild retribution than indifference or a sentimental tendency to forgiveness characteristic of humanitarian democracy. It is his indignation with what he saw as the dilution in the public life of France in his day of the sense of justice – to him a kind of intuitive sense of absolute moral pitch – that drove him from one extreme remedy to another and caused him to reject anything that he suspected of inclining towards compromise with stupidity or wickedness. It is the absence of the sense of absolute moral values, and of the decisive part played in human life by the moral will, that, for Sorel, is Marx's greatest single weakness: he is too historicist, too determinist, too relativist. Sorel's uncompromising voluntarism is at the heart of his entire outlook; there is in Marx too much emphasis on economics, not enough ethical doctrine.

The carrier of true moral values today is the proletariat. Only workers have true respect for work, for family, for sacrifice, for love. They are frugal, dignified, honest. For him, as for Fernand

[1] 'L'Éthique du socialisme', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 7 (1899), 301.

Pelloutier, the true founder of French syndicalism, they are beings touched by grace. For Sorel they were what peasants were for Herzen, what 'the folk' was for Herder and the populists, what 'the nation' was for Barrès. It is this traditionalism, which he shared with a certain type of conservative, and the quality of his domestic life with the simple and religious Marie David, that may have deepened his sense of the gulf between the moral dignity of the workers and the character and values of the pliable and the clever who rose to success in democracies. He found, or thought he found, this farouche integrity in Proudhon, in Péguy, in Pelloutier and other uncompromising fighters for justice or independence at whatever cost; he looked for it in the royalist *littérateurs*, in ultra-nationalists, in all resistance to time-serving supporters of the Republic and its demagogues. Hence his lack of sympathy for the populist nationalism of Déroulède, as for the entire Boulangist front. He might have approved of the *Croix-de-feu*, but never of Poujadism.

Sorel's relationship to Marx is harder to define: classes and the class war as the central factor in social change; universal, timeless ideals as disguises for temporary class interests; man as a self-transforming, creative, tool-inventing being; the proletariat – the producers – as the bearer of the highest human values; these ideas he never abandoned. But he rejected the entire Hegelian-Marxist teleology which fuses facts and values. Sorel believed in absolute moral values: the historicism of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition was never acceptable to him, still less the view that issues of basic moral or political principle can be solved by social scientists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists; or that techniques based on imitation of the methods of natural science can explain and explain away ideas or values, to the permanence and power of which all history and art, all religion and morality, testify; or can, indeed, explain human conduct in mechanistic or biological terms, as the positivists, the blinkered adherents of *la petite science*, believe.

Sorel regards values, both moral and aesthetic, though their forms and applications may alter, as being independent of the march of events. Hence he regards sociological analysis of works of art, whether by Diderot or Marxist critics, as evidence of their profound lack of aesthetic sense, blindness to the mystery of the act of creation, and to the part that art plays in the life of mankind. Yet he shows little consistency when engaged on exposing the motives of the enemy; then he is more than ready to use all the tools of psychological or sociological analysis provided by those who probe for true springs of action by 'unmasking' interests disguised as unalterable laws or disinterested ideals. Thus he fully accepts the Marxist view that economic laws are not laws of nature, but human arrangements, created, whether consciously or not, in the interests of a given class. To look upon them as objective necessities, as bourgeois economists do, is to reify them, an illusion that plays into the hands of that class to whose advantage it is to represent them as being eternal and unchangeable. But then he draws the un-Marxist, voluntarist corollary that freely chosen effort and struggle can change a great deal; and parts company with the orthodox who insist on a rigorous and predictable causal correlation between productive forces and the superstructure of institutions and ideas. The moral absolutes must not be touched: they do not alter with changes in the forces or relations of production.

History for Sorel is more of a wild flux than Marx supposed: society is a creation, a work of art, not (as, perhaps, the State is) a mere product of economic forces. Marx's economism he regards as overstated; this may have been necessary (as Engels, in effect, admitted) in order to counter idealistic or liberal-individualist theories of history. But in the end such theories may, he thinks, lead to a belief in the possibility of predicting the social arrangements of the future. This is dangerous and delusive Utopianism. Such fantasies may stimulate the workers, but they can arm despotisms too. Even if the workers win their fight against the

bourgeoisie, yet, unless they are educated to be creative, they too may generate an oppressive elite of doctrinaire intellectuals from within their own class. He accuses Marx of relying altogether too much on that Hegelian maid-of-all-work, the world spirit, although Marx is credited with understanding that science (and especially economic science) is not a 'mill' into which you can drop any problem facing you, and which yields solutions.[1] Methods of application are everything. Did not Marx himself once declare, '*Anyone who makes plans for after the revolution is a reactionary*'?[2] Nor, according to Sorel, did Marx believe in a political party of the working class; for a party, once in the saddle, may well become tyrannical and self-perpetuating, no matter what its manifestos state. Marx, after all, Sorel tells us, believed in the reality of classes alone.

This is a greatly Sorelified Marx: Sorel rejects everything in Marx that seems to him political – his notion of the workers' party, his theory of, and practical measures for, the organisation of the revolution, his determinism, above all the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Sorel regards as a sinister recrudescence of the worst elements of repressive Jacobinism. Even the anarchist classless society with which true human history is to begin is virtually ignored by Sorel: evidently it is too much of a conceptual, ideological construction. 'Socialism is not a doctrine,' he declared, 'not a sect, not a political system; it is the emancipation of the working classes who organise themselves,

[1] RV 173.

[2] RV 168. [Sorel reports that this passage appears in a letter which, according to the economist Lujo Brentano, Marx wrote to one of his English friends, E. S. Beesly. This story derives from an article by the German social democrat Eduard Bernstein, 'Des forces de la démocratie industrielle: Réponse a Mlle Luxemburg', *Mouvement Socialiste* 1899 vol. 2 (July–November), 1 September, 257–71, at 270. Bernstein says that Brentano was writing in Munich's *Allgemeine Zeitung* shortly beforehand. However, the only article attributed to Brentano that fits this description, 'Der soziale Friede und die Wandlungen der Sozialdemokratie', *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 April 1899, 1–2, has nothing to say about such a letter, which also appears not to have survived.]

instruct themselves and create new institutions.'[1] The proletariat is for him a body of producers at once disciplined and inspired by the nature of the labour they perform. It is this that makes them a class and not a party. The proletarians are not simply the discontented masses; the proletarian revolution is not merely a revolt of poor against rich, of the *popolo minuto* of the Italian communes, organised and led by a self-appointed general staff, the kind of rising advocated by Babeuf or Blanqui; for this can happen anywhere and at any time. The true social revolution of our day must be the revolt of a heroic class of producers and makers against exploiters and their agents and parasites, something that cannot happen unless – this Marx's crucial discovery – a society has reached a certain stage of technological development, and the truly creative class has developed a moral personality of its own. (It is this emphasis on the intrinsic value and revolutionary character of the culture of the producers – the proletariat – that appealed to Gramsci and caused him to defend Sorel against his detractors.) Sorel does not seem to have contemplated a society so mechanised as to generate a technocratic bureaucracy involving both managers and workers, in which social dynamism is stifled by the organisation required by the sheer size of the industrial system. According to Daniel Halévy, France at the turn of the century, and in particular Paris and its environs, were relatively unindustrialised compared with England or Germany. Sorel is closer to Proudhon's world than to that of General Motors or ICI.[2]

Only conflict purifies and strengthens. It creates durable unity and solidarity; whereas political parties, which anyone, of whatever social formation, can enter, are ramshackle structures, liable to opportunist coalitions and alliances. This is the vice of democracy. Not only is it the sham denounced by Marxists, a mere front for capitalist control; but the very ideal of democracy

[1] 'La Crise du socialisme', *Revue politique et parlementaire* 18 (1898), 612.
[2] [Imperial Chemical Industries (1926–2007).]

– national unity, reconciliation of differences, social harmony, devotion to the common good, Rousseau's General Will raised above the battle of the factions – all this destroys the conditions in which alone men can grow to their full stature – the struggle, the social conflict. The most fatal of all democratic institutions are parliaments, since they depend on compromise, concessions, conciliation; even if we forget about the ruses, equivocation, hypocrisy of which the syndicalists speak, political combinations are the death of all heroism, indeed of morality itself. The member of parliament, no matter how militant his past, is inevitably driven into peaceful association, even co-operation, with the class enemy, in committees, in lobbies, in the chamber itself. The representative of the working classes, Sorel observed, becomes an excellent bourgeois very easily. The hideous examples are before our eyes – Millerand, Briand, Viviani, the spell-binding demagogue Jean Jaurès with his easily acquired popularity. Sorel had once hoped for much from these men, but was disillusioned. They all turned out to be squalid earthworms, rhetoricians, grafters and intriguers like the rest.

Sorel goes even farther. Creative vitality cannot exist where everything gives, where it is too soft to resist. Unless the enemy – not the parasitic intellectuals and theorists, but the leaders of the capitalist forces – are themselves energetic and fight back like men, the workers will not find enemies worthy of their steel, and will themselves tend to degenerate. Only against a strong and vigorous opponent can truly heroic qualities be developed. Hence Sorel's characteristic wish that the bourgeoisie might develop stronger sinews. No serious Marxist could begin to accept this thesis, not even the mildest reformist, not even those who, like Bernstein, denied the validity of the Marxist historical libretto and declared in language worthy of Sorel himself: 'The goal […] is nothing to me: the movement is everything.'[1] Sorel

[1] 'Dieses Ziel, was immer es sei, ist mir gar nichts, die Bewegung alles.' 'Sozialdemokratie

averts his gaze from the aftermath of the ultimate victory of the working class. He is concerned only with rises and falls, creative societies and classes and decadent ones. No perfection, no final victory, is possible in social existence; only in art, in pure creation, can this be achieved. Rembrandt, Ruysdael, Vermeer, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner, Debussy, Delacroix, the impressionist painters of his own day – these were capable of reaching an unsurpassable summit in their art. Hence his attack on those who sell their genius for fame or money. Meyerbeer can be despised but not blamed: he was a true child of his age and milieu: his gift was as vulgar as the audience which he knew how to please; not so Massenet, who prostituted his more genuine talent to please the bourgeois public. Something of this kind, he seems to think, is true of Anatole France too. The total fulfilment that is possible in art, in science, in the case of individual men of genius, cannot occur in the life of society. Hence Sorel's distrust of the entire Marxist scenario: the expropriation of the expropriators, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the reign of plenty, the withering away of the State. He ignores practical problems; he is not interested in the way in which production, distribution, exchange, will be regulated in the new order, nor in whether there is any possibility of abolishing scarcity without performing at least some tasks that can hardly be described as creative. Marxists can scarcely be blamed if they did not regard as their own a man who wished to preserve the enemy in being lest the swords of his own side rusted in their scabbards, who had nothing to say about the ideal of a free society of associated producers combining to fight inanimate nature, but, on the contrary, declared, 'Everything may be saved if the proletariat, by its use of violence, [...] restores to the middle class something of its former energy',[1] a man who did not seem to care about the problems

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und die Revolution der Gesellschaft', *Neue Zeit* 16 (1897–8) no. 1, 556; quoted by Sorel, op. cit. (390/1), 296.

[1] RV 110.

of poverty and misery as such, and protested against sabotage of factories, because this was wilful destruction of the fruits of someone's creative labour. No man could claim to be a Marxist if he condemned revolutionary terror as a political act and damned Jacobins as tyrants and fanatics – men on whom Marx, to some degree, and even more Lenin, looked as their legitimate ancestors. Sorel denounces activity that springs from morally impure feelings, from motives infected by bourgeois poisons: 'The fierce envy of the impoverished intellectual,' he declares, 'who would like to see the rich merchant guillotined, is a vicious feeling that is not in the least socialist.'[1] He cares only for the preservation of heroic vitality and courage and strength which may decline if total victory leaves the victor no enemy.

Sorel was aware of the oddity of his position, and took perverse and somewhat malicious pleasure in exposing the weakness or confusions of his allies. He pronounced socialism to be dead in the early years of our century. He made no effort to influence any active social or political group. He remained true to his professions: isolated, independent, a man on his own. If he has any parallel within the socialist movement, it is with the equally independent and unpredictable Viennese critic and journalist Karl Kraus, also concerned with morality, and the preservation of style in life and literature.[2] Even Bernard Shaw, who admired vitality, style, Napoleonic qualities, the 'life force', had a greater affinity with him than learned theorists like Kautsky, Plekhanov, Guesde, Max Adler, Sidney Webb and the other pillars of European socialism. To him they were everything that he despised most deeply – arid, cerebral, latter-day sophists, clerks and glossators who turned every vital impulse into abstract formulae, Utopian blueprints, learned dust. He poured the

[1] *Matériaux d'une théorie du proletariat* (1919), 2nd ed. (Paris, 1921), 98/1.

[2] Marxism is in danger of becoming 'a mythology founded on the *maladies of language*', he wrote in a letter to Croce of 27 December 1897. *La critica* 25 (1927), 52.

vials of his scorn upon them. They repaid him by ignoring him completely.

Jaurès called Sorel the metaphysician of syndicalism. And, indeed, Sorel believed that in every human soul there lay hidden a metaphysical ember glowing beneath the cinders. If one could blow this into a flame, it would kindle a conflagration that would destroy mediocrity, routine, cowardice, opportunism, corrupt bargains with the class enemy. Society can be saved only by the liberation of the producers, that is, the workers, particularly those who work with their hands. The founders of syndicalism were right: the workers must be protected against domination by experts and ideologists and professors – the intellectual elite of Plato's hideous dream – what Bakunin (with Marx in mind) had called 'pedantocracy'.[1] 'Can you conceive', asked Sorel, 'of anything more horrible than government by professors?'[2] In these days such men, he observes, tend to be, as often as not, *déraciné* intellectuals, or Jews without a country – men who have no home, no hearth of their own, 'no ancestral tombs to protect, no relics to defend against the barbarians'.[3]

This is, of course, the violent rhetoric of the extreme right – of Maistre, of Carlyle, of German nationalists, of French anti-Dreyfusards, of anti-Semitic chauvinists – of Maurras and Barrès, Drumont and Déroulède. But it is also, at times, the language of Fourier and Cobbett, Proudhon and Bakunin, and would later be spoken by Fascists and National Socialists and their literary allies in many countries, as well as those who thunder against critical intellectuals and rootless cosmopolitans in the Soviet Union and other countries of eastern Europe. No one was closer to this style

[1] [Bakunin seems not to have used this exact term (which appears earlier in Comte and Mill), though he does say in *Gosudarstvennost´ i anarkhiya* (1873): 'To be the slaves of pedants – what a fate for humanity!' *Archives Bakounine*, ed. Arthur Lehning (Leiden, 1961–81), vol. 3, *Étatisme et anarchie*, 112; Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, ed. and trans. Marshall Shatz (Cambridge, 1990), 134.]

[2] *Le Procès de Socrate: Examen critique des thèses socratiques* (Paris, 1889), 183.

[3] ibid. 158.

of thought and expression than the so-called left-wing Nazis – Gregor Strasser and his followers in the early days of Hitler, and in France men like Déat and Drieu la Rochelle.

There is an anti-intellectual and anti-Enlightenment stream in the European radical tradition, at times allied with populism, or nationalism, or neo-medievalism, that goes back to Rousseau and Herder and Fichte, and enters agrarian, anarchist, anti-Semitic and other anti-liberal movements, creating anomalous combinations, sometimes in open opposition to, sometimes in an uneasy alliance with, the various currents of socialist and revolutionary thought. Sorel, whose hatred of democracy, the bourgeois republic, and above all the rational outlook and liberal values of the intelligentsia, was obsessive, fed this stream, indirectly at first, but towards the end of the first decade of our century more violently and openly until, by 1910, this caused a breach between him and his left-wing allies.

Doubtless his devout upbringing, his deep roots in traditional, old-fashioned French provincial life, his unspoken but profoundly felt patriotism, played their part: what seemed to him the demoralisation and disintegration of traditional French society plainly preoccupied him throughout his life and intensified his basic xenophobia and hostility to those who seemed to him to wander beyond the confines of the traditional culture of the West. His anti-intellectualism and anti-Semitism sprang from the same roots as those of Proudhon and Barrès. But there was also the decisive influence of the philosophy of Henri Bergson. With his friend Péguy, Sorel attended Bergson's lectures, and, like Péguy, was deeply and permanently affected.

It was from Bergson that he derived the notion, which he could equally well have found in the francophobe German Romantics a century earlier, that reason was a feeble instrument compared with the power of the irrational and the unconscious in the life both of individuals and societies. He was profoundly impressed by Bergson's doctrine of the unanalysable *élan vital*,

the inner force that cannot be rationally grasped or articulated, which thrusts its way into the empty and unknowable future, and moulds both biological growth and human activity. Not theoretical knowledge but action, and only action, gives understanding of reality. Action is not a means to preconceived ends, it is its own policy-maker and pathfinder. Prediction, even if it were possible, would kill it. We have an inner sense of what we are at, very different from, and incompatible with, the outside view, that is, calm contemplation that classifies, dissects, establishes clear structures. The intellect freezes and distorts. One cannot render movement by rest, nor time by space, nor the creative process by mechanical models, nor something living by something still and dead – this is an old Romantic doctrine that Bergson revivified and developed. Reality must be grasped intuitively, by means of images, as artists conceive it, not with concepts or arguments or Cartesian reasoning. This is the soil which gave birth to Sorel's celebrated doctrine of the social myth which alone gives life to social movements.

There is another source, too, whence the theory of myth may have sprung – the teachings of the founder of modern sociology, Émile Durkheim, who stood at the opposite extreme from Bergson. Rational and sternly positivist, he believed, like Comte, that science alone could answer our questions; what science could not do, no other method could achieve; he was implacably opposed to Bergson's deep irrationalism. Durkheim, who became the leading ideologist of the Third Republic, taught that no society could remain stable without a high degree of social solidarity between its members; this in its turn depended on the prevalence in it of dominant social myths bound up with appropriate ritual and ceremonial; religion had in the past been by far the most powerful of the forms in which this sense of solidarity found natural expression. Myths are not for Durkheim false beliefs about reality. They are not beliefs about anything, but beliefs *in* something – in descent from a common ancestor,

in transforming events in a common past, in common traditions, in shared symbols enshrined in a common language, above all in symbols sanctified by religion and history. The function of myths is to bind a society, create a structure governed by rules and habits, without which the individual may suffer from a sense of isolation and solitude, may experience anxiety, feel lost; and this in its turn leads to lawlessness and social chaos. For Durkheim myths are ultimately a utilitarian, if uncontrived, spontaneous and natural, response to a quasi-biological need; his account of their function is treated by him as an empirical discovery of a Burkean kind, of a necessary condition for social stability. Sorel abhorred utilitarianism, and in particular the quest for social peace and cohesion by cautious republican academics, as an attempt to muffle the class war in the interests of the bourgeois republic.

For Sorel, the function of myths is not to stabilise, but to direct energies and inspire action. They do this by embodying a dynamic vision of the movement of life, the more potent because not rational, and therefore not subject to criticism and refutation by university wiseacres. A myth is compounded of images that are 'coloured',[1] and affect men not as reason does, nor education of the will, nor the command of a superior, but as ferment of the soul which creates enthusiasm and incites to action, and, if need be, turbulence. Myths need have no historical reality; they direct our emotions, mobilise our will, give purpose to all that we are and do and make; they are, above all, not Utopias, which from Plato onward are descriptions of impossible states of affairs, fantasies in the heads of intellectuals remote from reality, evasion of concrete problems, escape into theory and abstraction. Sorel's myths are ways of transforming relationships between real facts by providing men with a new vision of the world and themselves: as when those who are converted to a new faith see the world and its furniture with new eyes. A Utopia is 'the product of intellectual

[1] RV 184.

labour; it is the work of theorists who, after observing and discussing the facts, seek to build a model against which to measure existing societies […]; it is a construction which can be taken to pieces',[1] its parts can be detached and fitted into other structures – bourgeois political economy is just such an artificial entity. But myths are wholes perceived instantaneously by the imagination. They are, in effect, political aspirations presented in the form of images 'made warm' by strong feeling. They reveal, as mere words cannot, hitherto invisible potentialities in the past and present, and so drive men to concerted efforts to bring about their realisation. The effort itself breeds new vitality, new effort and militancy in an endless dynamic process, spiralling upwards, which he called 'giving an aspect of reality to hopes of immediate action'.[2]

The Christian vision of the Second Coming that is at hand is, for Sorel, a myth of this kind – in its light men accepted martyrdom. The Calvinist belief in the renovation of Christianity was a vision of a new order that was not of this world, but fired by it the believers successfully resisted the advance of secular humanism. The idea of the French Revolution, referred to with fervour at civic gatherings in French provincial towns, lives on as a vague but ardent image that commands loyalty and stimulates action of a particular kind, but a myth that cannot, any more than a hymn, or a flag, be translated into a specific programme, a set of clear objectives. 'When masses of men become aroused, then an image is formed which constitutes a social myth.'[3] This is how the Italian Risorgimento presented itself to the followers of Mazzini. It is by means of myths that socialism can be converted into a kind of social poetry, can be expressed in action but not in prose, not in treatises intended merely to be understood. The French revolutionary armies in 1792 were inspired by an ardent myth, and won; the royalist forces lacked it, and were defeated. The Greeks lived and flourished in a world filled with myths until

[1] RV 38. [2] RV 149. [3] RV 36.

they were subverted by the sophists, and after them by rootless oriental cosmopolitans who flooded into Greece and ruined her. The analogy with the present is all too patent.

Sorel's myth is not a Marxist idea. It has a greater affinity with the modernist psychologism of Loisy or Tyrrell, William James's doctrine of the will, Vaihinger's 'philosophy of "as if"', than with Marx's rationalist conception of the unity of theory and practice. The notion of 'the people', 'the folk' – good, simple and true, but unawakened, as it is conceived by populists, both radical and reactionary, of the eternal 'real nation' in the thought of nationalists, as opposed to its corrupt or craven representatives – Barrès's 'la terre et les morts'[1] – these are Sorel's, not Durkheim's myths. Unsympathetic critics might say the same of most Marxists' use of the concept of the true, dialectically grasped interests of the proletariat, as opposed to its actual 'empirical' wishes, perhaps even of the notion of classless society itself, provided that its outlines remain blurred. The function of a myth is to create 'an epic state of mind'.[2] Sorel's insistence on its irrationality is, perhaps, what caused Lenin to dismiss him so curtly and contemptuously.

What is to be the myth of the workers? What is to raise them to the state of heroic grandeur, above the grey routine of their humdrum lives? Something which, Sorel believes, already inspires those activists in the French *syndicats* who have found their leader in the admirable Fernand Pelloutier, who has rightly kept them from contamination by democratic politics – the myth of the general strike. The syndicalist general strike must not be confused with the ordinary industrial or 'political' strike, which is a mere effort to extort better conditions or higher wages from the masters, and presupposes acquiescence in a social and economic structure common to owner and wage slave. This is mere haggling and is the very opposite of the true class war.

[1] See, e.g., *La Terre et les morts (Sur quelles réalités fonder la conscience française)* (Paris, [1899]).

[2] RV 330: 'un état d'esprit tout épique'.

The myth of the syndicalist general strike is a call for the total overthrow of the entire abominable world of calculation, profit and loss, the treatment of human beings and their powers as commodities, as material for bureaucratic manipulation, the world of illusory consensus and social harmony, of economic or sociological experts no matter what master they serve, who treat men as subjects of statistical calculations, malleable 'human material', forgetting that behind such statistics there are living human beings, not so much with normal human needs – to Sorel that does not appear to matter much – but free moral agents able collectively to resist and create and mould the world to their will.

The enemy for Sorel is not always the same: during the Dreyfus affair it was the nationalist demagogues with their paranoiac, Jacobin cries of treason, their fanatical search for scapegoats and wicked incitement of the mob against the Jews,[1] who play this role. After their defeat, it is the victors – the 'counter-Church' of the intellectuals, the intolerant, dehumanising, republican 'politico-scholastic' party, led by academic despots, bred in the *École normale* – who increasingly become the principal targets of his fury. The general strike is the climax of mounting militancy and 'violence', when, in an act of concentrated collective will, the workers, in one concerted move, leave their factories and workshops, secede to the Aventine, and then arise as one man and inflict a total, crushing, permanent, 'Napoleonic' defeat upon the accursed system that shuffles them into Durkheim's or Comte's compartments and hierarchies, and thereby all but robs them of their human essence. This is the great human uprising of the children of light against the children of darkness, of fighters for freedom against merchants, intellectuals, politicians – the miserable crew of the masters of the capitalist world with their mercenaries, men promoted from the ranks, bought off

[1] Destined, Sorel declared in 1901, to become a formidable weapon. *De l'église et de l'état* (Paris, 1901), 54–5.

and absorbed into the hierarchy, careerists and social planners, right-wing and left-wing power- or status-seekers, promoters of societies based on greed and competition, or else on the stifling oppression of remorselessly tidy rational organisation.

Did Sorel believe, did he expect the workers to believe, that this final act of liberation would, or could, in fact, occur as a historical event? It is difficult to tell. He had nothing favourable to say of the general strikes, designed to secure specific concessions, that broke out (during his most syndicalist phase) in Belgium in 1904, above all in the abortive Russian revolution of 1905. This, for him, was Péguy's *mystique* reduced to mere *politique*. Moreover, if he believed, as he appeared to, that if the enemy weakened so would the class of producers, would not total victory lead to the elimination of the tension without which there is no effort, no creation? Yet without a myth it is impossible to create an energetic proletarian movement. Empirical arguments against the possibility or desirability of the general strike are not relevant. It is, one suspects, not intended as a theory of action, still less as a plan to be realised in the real world.

The weapon of the workers is violence. Although it gives its name to Sorel's best-known work ('my standard work',[1] as he ironically referred to it), its nature is never made clear. Class conflict is the normal condition of society, and force is continuously exerted against the producers, that is, the workers, by the exploiters. Force does not necessarily consist in open coercion, but in control and repression by means of institutions which, whether by design or not, have the effect, as Marx and his disciples have made clear, of promoting the power of the possessing class. This pressure must be resisted. To resist force by force is likely to result, as in the case of the Jacobin revolution, in the replacing of one yoke by another, the substitution of new masters for old. A Blanquist putsch could lead to mere coercion by the State – the dictatorship of

[1]Letter to Croce, 25 March 1921, *La critica* 28 (1930), 194.

the proletariat, perhaps even of its own representatives, as the successor to the dictatorship of capitalists. Dogmatic revolutionaries easily become oppressive tyrants: this theme is common to Sorel and the anarchists. Camus revived it in his polemic with Sartre. Force, by definition, represses; violence, directed against it, liberates. Only by instilling fear in the capitalists can the workers break their power, the force exerted against them.

This, indeed, is the function of proletarian violence: not aggression, but resistance. Violence is the striking off of chains, the prelude to regeneration. It may be possible to secure a more rational existence, better material conditions, a higher standard of living, security, even justice for the workers, the poor, the oppressed, without violence. But the renewal of life, rejuvenation, the liberation of creative powers, return to Homeric simplicity, to the sublimity of the Old Testament, to the spirit of the early Christian martyrs, of Corneille's heroes, of Cromwell's Ironsides, of the French revolutionary armies – these cannot be attained by persuasion, without violence as the weapon of liberty.

How the use of violence can in practice be distinguished from the use of force is never made clear. It is merely postulated as the only alternative to peaceful negotiation which, by presupposing a common good, common to workers and employers alike, denies the reality of class war. Marx, too, talked about the need for revolution to purify the proletariat from the filth of the old world and render it fit for the new. Herzen spoke of the cleansing storm of the revolution. Proudhon and Bakunin spoke in similarly apocalyptic terms. Even Kautsky declared that revolution raises men from degradation to a more exalted view of life. Sorel is obsessed by the idea of revolution. For him, faith in revolutionary violence and hatred of force entails, in the first place, the stern self-insulation of the workers. Sorel fervently agrees with the syndicalist organisers of the *bourses de travail* (a peculiar combination of labour exchanges, trades councils, and social and educational centres of militant workers) that proletarians who

allow themselves any degree of co-operation with the class enemy are lost to their own side. All talk of responsible and humane employers, reasonable and peace-loving workers, nauseates him. Profit-sharing, factory councils that include both masters and men, democracy which recognises all men as equal, are fatal to the cause. In total war there can be no fraternisation.

Does violence mean more than this? Does it mean occupation of factories, the seizing of power, physical clashes with police or other agents of the possessing class, the shedding of blood? Sorel remains unclear. The conduct of the Allemanist workers who marched with Jaurès (then still well thought of) at a certain moment of the Dreyfus affair, is one of his very few allusions to the correct use of proletarian violence. Anything that increases militancy, but does not lead to the formation of power structures among the workers themselves, is approved. The distinction between force and violence appears to depend entirely on the character of its function and motive. Force imposes chains, violence breaks them. Force, open or concealed, enslaves; violence, always open, makes free. These are moral and metaphysical, not empirical, concepts. Sorel is a moralist and his values are rooted in one of the oldest of human traditions. That is why Péguy listened to him, and why his theses do not belong only to their own times but retain their freshness. Rousseau, Fichte, Proudhon, Flaubert are Sorel's truest modern ancestors, as well as Marx the destroyer of rationalisations, the preacher of class war and of the proletarian revolution; not Marx the social scientist, the historical determinist, the author of programmes for a political movement, the practical conspirator.

IV

The doctrine of myths and its corollary, the emphasis on the power of the irrational in human thought and action, is a consequence

of the modern scientific movement, and the application of scientific categories and methods to the behaviour of men. The relatively simple models of human nature which underlay the central ideas of social and political philosophers until quite far into the nineteenth century were gradually being superseded by an increasingly complicated and unstable picture as new and disturbing hypotheses about the springs of action were advanced by psychologists and anthropologists. The rise of doctrines according to which men were determined by non-rational factors, some of them refracted in highly misleading ways in men's consciousness, directed attention to actual social and political practice and its true causes and conditions, which only scientific investigation could uncover, and which severely limited the area of free will or even made it vanish altogether. This naturalistic approach had the effect of playing down the role of conscious reasons by which the actors mistakenly supposed themselves, and appeared to others, to be motivated. These may well have been among the most decisive causes of the decline of classical political theory, which assumes that men who are, to some degree, free to choose between possibilities, do so for motives intelligible to themselves and others, and are, pro tanto, open to conviction by rational argument in reaching their decisions. The penetration of the 'disguises', of concealed factors – psychological, economic, anthropological – in individual and social life by examination of their actual role transformed the simpler model of human nature with which political theorists from Hobbes to J. S. Mill had operated, and shifted emphasis from political argument to the less or more deterministic descriptive disciplines that began with Tocqueville and Taine and Marx, and were carried on by Weber and Durkheim, Le Bon and Tarde, Pareto and Freud, and their disciples in our time.

Sorel rejected determinism, but his theory of myths belongs to this development. His social psychology is an odd amalgam of Marxism, Bergsonian intuitionism, and Jamesian psychology, in

which men, once they realise that they are, whether they know it or not, shaped by the class conflict (which he treats as a historical datum), can, by an effort of the will reinforced by the inspiration of the appropriate myth, freely develop the creative sides of their nature, provided they do not attempt to do so as mere individuals, but collectively, as a class. Even this is not entirely true of individual men of genius – especially of artists, who are capable of creation in adverse social conditions by the strength of their own indomitable spirit. Of this dark process James and Croce and Renan seemed to him to show a deeper understanding than the blinkered sociological environmentalists. But Sorel is not a consistent thinker. His desperate lifelong search for a class, or group, which can redeem humanity, or at least France, from mediocrity and decay, is itself rooted in a quasi-Marxist sociology of history as a drama in which the protagonists are classes generated by the growth of productive forces, a doctrine for which he claims objective validity.

V

The effect of Sorel's doctrine upon the revolutionary syndicalist movement was minimal. He wrote articles in journals, collaborated with Lagardelle, Delesalle and Péguy, offered homage to Fernand Pelloutier, and talked and lectured to groups of admirers in Paris. But when Victor Griffuelhes, the strongest personality since Fernand Pelloutier among the syndicalists, was asked whether he read Sorel, he replied, 'I mostly read Alexander Dumas.'[1] Sorel was himself what he most despised in others – too intellectual, too sophisticated, too remote from the reality of the workers' lives. He looked for biblical or Homeric heroes capable of the epic spirit and was constantly disappointed. During the

[1] Édouard Dolléans, *Proudhon* (Paris, 1948), 491.

Dreyfus case, he denounced the anti-Dreyfusards who seemed to him to stand for lies, injustice and unscrupulous demagoguery. But after the Dreyfusards had won, he was in turn disgusted by the ignoble political manoeuvring, cynicism and dissimulation of the friends of the people. Jaurès's humanity and eloquence seemed to him mere self-interested demagoguery, democratic claptrap, dust in the workers' eyes, no better than Zola's rodomontades, or the silver periods of Anatole France, or betrayals by false friends of the workers, the worst of whom was Aristide Briand, once the fervent champion of the general strike.

He continued to live quietly in Boulogne-sur-Seine. For ten years, until 1912, he took the tram to attend Bergson's lectures, and on Thursdays came to the gatherings in the offices of Péguy's *Cahiers de la quinzaine*, which he dominated. There he delivered those vast monologues about politics and economics, classical and Christian culture, art and literature, which dazzled his disciples. He drew on a large store of unsystematic reading; but what lingered in his listeners' memories were his mordant paradoxes. Péguy listened reverently to *le père Sorel*, but in the end, when Sorel, disillusioned with the syndicalists who had gone the way of all workers into the morass of social democracy, began to look for new paladins against political impurity, and denounced the radical intellectuals, especially the Jews among them, too violently, even he became uncomfortable. When Sorel's anti-Semitism became more open and more virulent, and he did an unfriendly turn to Julien Benda (a ferocious critic of Bergson and of every form of nationalism, whom Péguy nevertheless greatly admired), and finally entered into an alliance with the militant royalists and chauvinists led by Maurras and the mystical Catholic nationalists grouped round Barrès, men who alone seemed to him independent, militant, and not tainted by the republican blight, this proved too much for Péguy, and he requested Sorel not to return. Sorel was deeply wounded. He preferred talk to writing. The audience of gifted writers and intellectuals was necessary to

him. He began to frequent the bookshop of a humbler follower, and went on talking as before.

The flirtation with the reactionaries in the so-called *Cercle Proudhon* did not last long. In 1912 Sorel acclaimed Mussolini, then a flamboyant socialist militant, as a *condottiere* who, one day, 'will salute the Italian flag with his sword'.[1] By 1914 he was once again on his own. When war broke out he felt abandoned; Bergson, Péguy, Maurras, even Hervé, all rallied to the defence of the Republic. During the war he was depressed and silent. He corresponded with Croce, who seemed to him critical and detached, and told his friend Daniel Halévy that the war was nothing but a fight between Anglo-American finance and the German General Staff. He did not seem to care greatly which gang emerged victorious.

After the war, in his letters to Croce, he criticised the beginnings of Fascism, but, perhaps under the influence of Pareto, and Croce's initial pro-Fascist moment, pronounced Mussolini a 'political genius'.[2] Lenin excited him far more. He saw him as a bold and realistic rejuvenator of socialism, the greatest socialist thinker since Marx, who had roused the Russian masses to an epic plane of revolutionary feeling. Lenin was Peter the Great or Robespierre, Trotsky was Saint-Just; their concept of the Soviets seemed to him pure syndicalism: he took it at its face value, as he did, perhaps, Mussolini's denunciation in 1920 of 'the State in all its forms and incarnations; the State of yesterday, of today and of tomorrow'.[3] He applauded the Bolsheviks' contempt for democracy, and, still more, their ferocious attitude to intellectuals. He declared that the mounting terror of the Bolshevik Party was less

[1] In a conversation with Jean Variot reported by Variot in *L'Éclair*, 11 September 1922. Quoted by Gaétan Pirou, *Georges Sorel (1847–1922)* (Paris, 1927), 53.

[2] J. Variot, *Propos de Georges Sorel* (Paris, 1935), 55.

[3] 'Divagazione: l'ora e gli orologi', *Il popolo d'Italia* no. 83 (6 April 1920), 7; *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, ed. Edoardo e Duilio Susmel (Florence, 1951–62), vol. 14, *Dalla Marcia di Ronchi al secondo Congresso dei Fasci (14 settembre 1919 – 25 maggio 1920)*, 398.

harmful than the force which it was designed to repress; in any case it was probably the fault of its Jewish members. He averted his eyes from the strengthening of the party apparatus, and would not speak of Russia as a socialist State, since this concept seemed to him, as it had seemed to Marx, a blatant contradiction in terms.

To use the State as a weapon against the bourgeoisie was, he declared, like 'Gribouille, who threw himself into the water to avoid getting wet in the rain'.[1] He still thought well of Mussolini, but he thought better of Lenin, to whom he wrote a passionate paean. By this time few listened to him; he was living in solitude and poverty – he had invested too much of his property in tsarist and Austrian bonds. His death, a few weeks before Mussolini's march on Rome, passed unnoticed. His last uttered word is said to have been 'Napoleon … '.

Of the two heroes of his declining years, Lenin ignored him; Mussolini, in search of distinguished intellectual ancestry, claimed him as a spiritual father. Fascist propaganda found useful ammunition in Sorel's writings: the mockery of liberal democracy, the violent anti-intellectualism, the appeal to the power of irrational forces, the calls to activism, violence, conflict as such, all this fed Fascist streams.[2] Sorel was no more a Fascist than Proudhon, but his glorification of action, honour, defiance, his deep hatred of democracy and equality, his contempt for liberals and Jews, are, like Proudhon's brand of socialism, not unrelated to the language and thought of Fascism and National Socialism; nor did his closest followers fail to note (and some among them to be duly influenced by) this fact. The ideological link of his views with what is common to romantic Bolshevism and left-

[1] RJ 144.

[2] A romantic, bitterly anti-democratic nineteenth-century Russian reactionary once declared that when he thought of the bourgeois in their hideous clothes scurrying along the streets of Paris, he asked himself whether it was for this that Alexander the Great, in his plumed helmet, had ridden down the Persian hosts at Abela. Sorel would not have repudiated this sentiment.

wing strains in Fascism is painfully plain. 'The cry "Death to the Intellectuals",' he wrote hopefully in his last published collection of articles, 'so often attributed to the Bolsheviks, may yet become the battle-cry of the entire world proletariat.'[1]

At this point, one might be tempted to bid Sorel goodbye as an eccentric visionary, a penetrating and cruel critic of the vices of parliamentary democracy and bourgeois humanitarianism – of what Trotsky once called 'Kantian-priestly, vegetarian-Quaker chatter'[2] – a writer chiefly read in Italy, both in leftist and nationalist circles, duly superseded by Pareto, Mosca and Michels, a friend of Croce, a minor influence on Mussolini, the inspirer of a handful of radicals of both the right and the left, a half-forgotten extremist safely buried in the pages of the more capacious histories of socialist doctrines. Yet his ghost, half a century later, is by no means laid.

VI

Sorel, like Nietzsche, preached the need for a new civilisation of makers and doers, what is now called a counter-culture or an alternative society. The progressive left in the nineteenth century believed in science and rational control of nature and of social and individual life, and on this based their attacks upon tradition, prejudice, aestheticism, clericalism, conservative or nationalist mystiques, whatever could not be defended by rational argument – these men have, to some extent, won. The technocratic, post-industrial society in which we are said to be living is governed by men who make use of skilled, scientific experts, rational planners, technocrats. The theory of convergence used to inform us, in its

[1] op. cit. (397/1), 53.

[2] *Terrorizm i kommunizm* (St Petersburg [sc. Petrograd], 1920), 61; *The Defence of Terrorism (Terrorism and Communism): A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (London, 1921), 60.

heyday, now evidently past, that societies on both sides of the Iron Curtain are conditioned by similar forces in all essential respects, whatever the differences in kind or degree of individual liberty enjoyed by their members.

This is the kind of order – democracy both real and sham – based on respect for blueprints and specialists, that Sorel most deeply feared and detested. A society of consumers without authentic moral values of their own, sunk in vulgarity and boredom in the midst of mounting affluence, blind to sublimity and moral grandeur, bureaucratic organisation of human lives in the light of what he called *la petite science*, positivist application of quasi-scientific rules to society – all this he despised and hated. Who would revolt against it? The workers had not fulfilled his expectations. They failed to respond to his trumpet calls; they continued to be preoccupied with their material needs; their mode of life remained hopelessly similar to that of the petite bourgeoisie, one day to be the main recruiting-ground of Fascism, a class which Sorel regarded as the greatest source of moral contamination. He died a disappointed man.

Yet, if he were alive today, the wave of radical unrest could scarcely have failed to excite him. Like Fanon and the Black Panthers, and some dissenting Marxist groups, he believed that the insulted and the oppressed can find themselves and acquire self-identity and human dignity in acts of revolutionary violence. To intimidate the cowardly bourgeoisie (or, in Fanon's case, imperialist masters) by audacious acts of defiance, though Sorel did not favour terrorism or sabotage, is in tune with his feeling and his rhetoric. Che Guevara's or Fanon's concern about poverty, suffering and inequality was not at the centre of Sorel's moral vision; but they would have fulfilled his ideal of revolutionary pride, of a will moved by absolute moral values.

The idea of repressive tolerance, the belief that toleration of an order that inhibits 'epic' states of mind is itself a form of repression, is an echo of his own view. The neo-Marxist dialectic

according to which all institutions and even doctrines are frozen forms of, and therefore obstacles to, the ever-flowing, ever-creative, human praxis, a kind of permanent revolution, might have seemed to him, even if he had understood the dark words of Hegelian neo-Marxism, mere incitement to anarchy. The metaphysics of the School of Frankfurt, and of Lukács (who was in his youth affected by Sorel's views), would surely have been roundly condemned by him as the latest Utopian and teleological nostrums of academic pedants, visionaries or charlatans.

In England anti-liberal critics – Wyndham Lewis and T. E. Hulme – took an interest in his ideas. Hulme translated the *Réflexions*. They found his emphasis on self-restraint and self-discipline sympathetic. Like them he hated disorder, bohemianism, the lack of self-imposed barriers, as symptoms of self-indulgence and decadence. But the revolt of those whom a German writer has recently described as the anabaptists of affluence,[1] the preachers of an alternative society uncontaminated by the vices of the past, might well have made an appeal to him. He would have been disturbed by their sexual permissiveness; chastity was for him the highest of virtues; their slovenly habits, their exhibitionism, their addiction to drugs, their formless lives would have enraged him; and he would have denounced their neo-primitivism, the Rousseauian belief that poverty and roughness are closer to nature than austerity and civilised habits, and therefore more authentic and morally pure. He regarded this as false and stupid and attacked it all his life. But the present state of Western society would have seemed to him a confirmation of Vico's prophecy of social disintegration as a prelude to a second barbarism, followed by a new, more virile civilisation, a new beginning in which men would again be simple, pious and severe. Barbarism did not frighten him.

[1][Erwin K. Scheuch, *Die Wiedertäufer der Wohlstandsgesellschaft: eine kritische Untersuchung der 'Neuen Linken' und ihrer Dogmen* (Cologne, 1968).]

He might have found reasons for acclaiming the Cultural Revolution in China. 'If socialism comes to grief,' he once observed, 'it will evidently be in the same way [as Protestantism], because it will be alarmed at its own barbarity,'[1] with the implication that it must not stop but plunge on – barbarism is, after all, an antidote to decay. This is instinctively believed by all those today who have opted out of a wicked society, as Sorel, who admired the early Christians and Puritans for their renunciation, so ardently wished the workers to do. Sparta rather than Athens. This alone created an unbridgeable gulf between Sorel and the easy-going, generous, humane Jaurès. It is this very quality that appeals to the grimmer dynamiters of the present.

But the strongest single link with the revolutionary movements of our day is his unyielding emphasis on the will. He believed in absolute moral ends that are independent of any dialectical or other historical pattern, and in the possibility, in conditions which men can themselves create, of realising these ends by the concerted power of the free and deliberate collective will. This, rather than a sense of the unalterable timetable of historical determinism, is the mood of the majority of the rebels, political and cultural, of the past two decades. Those who join revolutionary organisations, and those who abandon them, are more often moved by moral indignation with the hypocrisy or inhumanity of the regime under which they live (or alternatively with similar vices in the revolutionary party which, disillusioned, they leave), than by a metaphysical theory of the stages of history – of social change by which they do not wish to be left behind. The reaction is moral more than intellectual, of will rather than reason; such men are against the prevailing system because it is unjust or bestial rather than irrational or obsolescent. More than seventy years ago[2] Eduard Bernstein became convinced that Marxism failed to provide an acceptable view of the ends of life,

[1] RV 19/1. [2] [Written in 1971.]

and preached the universal values of the neo-Kantians. So did Karl Liebknecht, who could not be accused of lack of revolutionary passion. This is far closer to Sorel's position, and connects him with modern revolutionary protest.

Yet, of course, this anti-rationalism was, to some degree, self-refuting. He knew that if faith in reason is delusive, it is only by the use of rational methods, by knowledge and self-knowledge and rational interpretation of the facts of history or psychology or social behaviour, that this could be discovered and established. He did not wish to stop invention and technology. He was no Luddite, he knew that to break machines is to perpetuate ignorance, scarcity and poverty. He might have admitted that the remedies offered by the modern insurgents are delusions; but this would not have troubled him. He proposed no specific economic or social policies. Like Hegel's opponents in post-Napoleonic Germany he appealed to love, solidarity, community; this, in due course, offered sustenance to 'extra-parliamentary' oppositions both of the right and of the left. If Fanon, or the militants of the Third World, or the revolutionary students, were not healers, he might have recognised them as the disease itself. This is what Herzen said about himself and the nihilists of his own generation. His lifelong effort to identify and distinguish the pure from the impure, the physicians from the patients, the heroic few who should be the saviours of society – workers, or radical nationalists, or Fascists, or Bolsheviks – ended in failure. Would he have tried to find them in colonial peoples, or black Americans, or students who have mysteriously escaped contamination by the false values of their society? We cannot tell. At any rate, the dangers of which he spoke were, and are, real. Recent events have shown that his diagnosis of the malaise is anything but obsolete.

He was almost everything that he so vehemently denounced, an alienated intellectual, a solitary thinker isolated from men of action who achieved no relationship with the workers and never became a member of any vigorous, co-operative group

of producers. He, whose symbol of creation was the cut stone, the chiselled marble, was productive only of words. He believed implicitly in family life and for twenty-five years had none. The apostle of action felt at home only in bookshops, among purveyors of words, talkers cut off, as he had always been, from the life of workers and artists. He remained eccentric, egocentric, an outsider of outsiders. This is an irony that, one may be sure, could scarcely have escaped him.

No monument to him exists. Ten years after his death, so Daniel Halévy tells us, Rolland Marcel, the director of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, came to Halévy with an odd story. He had recently met the Ambassador of Fascist Italy, who informed him that his government had learnt that Sorel's grave was in a state of disrepair: the Fascist government offered to put up a monument to the eminent thinker. Soon after this, the Ambassador of the USSR approached him with an identical proposal on behalf of the Soviet government. Halévy promised to get in touch with Sorel's family. After a long delay he received a communication which said that the family regarded the grave as its own private affair, and that of no one else. Halévy was delighted. The message was dry, brusque and final. It might have come from Sorel himself.

The prophet of concerted collective action, of pragmatic approaches, prized only absolute values, total independence. He was to be the modern Diogenes bent on exploding the most sacred dogmas and respected beliefs of all the establishments of his enlightened age. Sorel is still worth reading. The world about and against which he was writing might be our own. Whether he is, as he wished to be, 'serious, formidable and sublime',[1] or, as often as not, perverse, dogmatic and obsessed, with all the moral fury of perpetual youth (and this fiery, not wholly adult, outraged feeling may in part account for his affinity with the

[1] RV 170.

young revolutionaries of our time), his ideas come at us from every quarter. They mark a revolt against the rationalist ideal of frictionless contentment in a harmonious social system in which all ultimate questions are reduced to technical problems, soluble by appropriate techniques. It is the vision of this closed world that morally repels the young today. The first to formulate this in clear language was Sorel. His words still have power to upset.