

Article

Bensaïd's Jeanne: Strategic Mythopoesis for Difficult Times

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Abstract: In this essay, I consider the significance of Daniel Bensaïd's work on Jeanne d'Arc with regard to dealing with the "difficult times" in which we live. (1) I first consider some of the background in early critical theory in order to show that Bensaïd's aim to recover Benjamin's notion of a "weak messianic power" requires following through with Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of enlightenment, and that this implies a critical rehabilitation of myth and mythopoesis. (2) Approaching Bensaïd's account of Jeanne in the light of Blumenberg's notion of "work on myth", I show how he portrays her in a way that establishes a concrete connection between the discordant temporalities of contingency and necessity, but that this is best understood in the radically immanent terms of prereflective embodied action as based on the corporeal sedimentation of an intercorporeal ethical habitus. Bensaïd's account of Jeanne thus offers a new lens of historical perception that can help reveal otherwise hidden possibilities for transformative historical agency in embodied coexistence today. (3) By way of conclusion, I briefly consider the deeper meaning and significance of this in terms of offering a non-Promethean mythico-political framework.

Keywords: Daniel Bensaïd; Joan of Arc; mythopoesis; Marxism; Walter Benjamin; historical agency; phenomenology of embodiment; heroism; Prometheanism

"Well burrowed, old mole!"¹

1. Introduction

In this essay, I consider what the unorthodox Marxism of Daniel Bensaïd (1946–2010) may have to offer us by way of dealing with the "difficult times" in which we live today. In particular, I want to bring to light the strategic (though perhaps unexpected) *mythopoetic* significance of his work on Jeanne d'Arc with regard to disclosing possibilities for historically agentive events in such circumstances. This will amount to showing how Bensaïd sought to recover Walter Benjamin's well-known but obscure notion of a "weak messianic power" by clarifying this recovery in terms of a phenomenology of embodied political action.

The discussion will unfold as follows: (1) I first consider some of the relevant background in early critical theory in order to show that the recovery of that Benjaminian notion requires following through with the implicit logic of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of enlightenment, and that this implies a critical rehabilitation of myth. (2) Approaching Bensaïd's work on Jeanne in the light of Hans Blumenberg's notion of "work on myth", I show how he portrays her not just in terms of an eventual logic but, more importantly, in a way that addresses the central problem bedeviling any serious account of historical agency—namely, establishing a concrete connection between the distinct temporalities of history and agency, which is to say, between the necessity or structural momentum of historical continuity and the contingency or eventuality of agentive discontinuity. Reading it through a phenomenological lens, I contend that Bensaïd's account of Jeanne is best interpreted in the fully immanent terms of prereflective embodied action based on the corporeal sedimentation of an intercorporeal ethical habitus. As a chiasmic nexus of necessity and contingency, such action can be construed as "weakly messianic" on the grounds that it involves—at least in a *prima facie* and predispositional way (which is what makes



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it “weak”)—an existentially imperative redemption of the past that can have historically progressive implications. To the extent that we find it credible and compelling, Bensaïd’s reworked myth of Jeanne thus contributes to a new framework of historical perception that can help reveal, within embodied coexistence today, otherwise hidden possibilities for historically agentive events as expressions of *our* “weak messianic power”. (3) By way of conclusion, I briefly consider the broader meaning of this view in terms of offering a non-Promethean mythico-political framework for radical progressive politics.

It is worth emphasizing, here at the outset, that the following discussion proposes what I intend to be a friendly—if somewhat unorthodox—reading of an unorthodox figure. The approach I take to Bensaïd here is based on sources that lie outside the theoretical space of his work itself; in particular, Bensaïd does *not* claim to be engaged in any sort of mythopoetic project at all, and he would probably vigorously reject my claims in this regard. However, my basic contention is that just as other aspects of Marxism and critical theory can be helpfully clarified through phenomenological means (something that seems especially true when Benjamin is involved), we can make considerably better sense of the meaning and significance of Bensaïd’s work on Jeanne d’Arc—including how it relates to his notion of a “melancholic wager” [2] and his quest for a “profane politics” [3]—if we do in fact approach it in terms of the framework that I sketch out below.

It is also worth emphasizing that the issues involved in this analysis are too numerous and far-reaching to be fully explored in a single essay. Some aspects will get short shrift, and many details will be glossed over, but hopefully the discussion will be sufficiently clear and comprehensible for readers to get a good sense of what I have in mind and to be able to form a judgment about it.

2. Critical Theory Background

It can seem a grim platitude these days to say that we are living in “difficult times”. Yet who exactly are *we*, and what exactly would it mean to characterize the times in which we are living not simply as bad (although that is certainly true), but *difficult*? These questions can of course be answered in many different ways, but if the “we” in question refers (admittedly somewhat imprecisely) to left-leaning progressive folks living in the West, then the felt “difficultness” of the present conjuncture seems to be a matter of its seeming intractability—pandemics aside, the world is literally on fire and seems to be hurtling uncontrollably toward catastrophe, with the doomsday clock hovering precariously close to midnight, while at the same time unmistakable signs of democratic backsliding and palpably faltering commitments to social solidarity, inclusion, and equality seem to be undermining any capacity we might have—or that we might think humanity more generally has—to do something about this mess. Looming over this global disorder is the chilling sense of an eclipse of reason. Not so much a lapse into outright irrationality, however, as a dialectical reversal through which what passed for ‘enlightened’ rationality, losing its normative bearings, effectively falls into the service of reactionary neoliberal governance. The difficultness in question could thus be seen as expressing a disheartening post-historical malaise in which the Enlightenment myth of historical progress—if not of some inexorably forward tendency, telic or otherwise, then at least of the irreversibility of progress and the impossibility of actually going backwards—upon the remnant core on which we had previously (if only tacitly and despite ourselves) remained reliant for a sense of orientation and hope amid the incessant flux of events, is today completely dissolving, “busted” once and for all by these disconcerting developments. We face the unsettling realization, in other words, that enlightenment is being dialed down on a dimmer switch, opening the door to the vertiginous, disorienting possibility of real regression—of slipping away from the normative goals that had been our guiding stars.

Such a bleak picture is not exactly new; Horkheimer and Adorno had already talked about something much like this back in the 1940s: “the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity” [4] (p. 1), they claimed—a view that resonates with Benjamin’s earlier catastrophic vision in which the “storm” of progress “irresistibly propels [what

Benjamin called ‘the angel of history’] into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward” [5] (p. 249). Yet even in the shadow of Auschwitz, Horkheimer and Adorno were not entirely without hope. While they certainly wanted to deny (and rightly so) any teleological progressivism, their conception of history was by no means an irredeemably negative *Verfallsgeschichte*. For them, history is suffused with contingency—the “calamity” that they observed and lamented was not inevitable, and by the same token a different and better future was, at least in principle, possible. Their analysis was anchored on a profound and inescapable ambiguity that they disclosed in the notion of enlightenment itself, *viz.*, its ineliminable entwinement with myth. In their well-known formulation, “myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology” [4] (p. xviii). Their aim thus became to up the ante on enlightenment, so to speak—to enlighten enlightenment about that ambiguity in order to prepare for “a positive concept of enlightenment” that could minimize “its entanglement in blind domination” [4] (p. xviii). Their aim became, in other words, to pursue a thoroughly rational reflection on the nature and pitfalls of enlightened reason so that “enlightenment itself, having mastered itself and assumed its own power, could break through the limits of enlightenment” [4] (p. 172). For Horkheimer and Adorno, these limits had especially to do with the myth of historical progress, and it would be by shaking us free from naïve assumptions concerning its inevitability that such progress could become a real, if difficult, possibility—as Adorno later put it, “progress occurs where it ends” [6] (p. 134).

If that is the case, then there is a silver lining in the difficultness that we face today: the lucid, if melancholic, realization of the radical contingency of historical progress and, hence, of the ever-present possibility of regress, is itself an important step forward. *Difficult* progress is the only kind! It is as though the sorry state of the world has helped us to fulfill a critical task precisely by making us feel so alienated from it. That may be what it takes to become disabused of the corrupting misapprehension that Benjamin had noted, for example, in the case of the German working class, *viz.*, “the notion that it was moving with the current” [5] (p. 250). This notion is corruptive in that it seduces us into tying our political aspirations to the twisted logic of capitalism—which is, however, ultimately antithetical to them—and, hence, to discount and neglect our own capacities for historical agency. This leads us to focus our attention on the shiny irreality of the future rather than on the grim circumstances of the actual present. The idea that there is an objectively progressive tendency or “current” in history encourages us to disburden ourselves of historical responsibilities and to be relatively passive passengers who *wait*; it makes us forget Marx and Engels’ insistence that “history does nothing” [7] (p. 116)². It is only when the course of events veers sharply off the anticipated rails that we can glimpse this error.

But what is the conclusion to be drawn? That there *is* a current of history, but that we are not moving with it? Or simply that there is no such singular current to be moving with at all? The former possibility is just as unwarranted as the initial naïve belief, and again it was Benjamin who saw this: “The concept of historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time”. He also drew the following conclusion for critical thought: “A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself” [5] (p. 252). Such is the gist of the second possibility, *i.e.*, that there is no singular current, and this resonates strongly with the felt difficultness of our times. Indeed, the adverse intractability that we experience may have precisely to do with that very plurality—the salutary loss of *a* linear sense of time brings to light a plurality of *times*—an asynchronous and anachronistic mashup of discontinuous and discordant temporalities. Once we realize that this is what history is like, we are in a position to make (difficult) progress. In the parlance of our times, this leads to a focus on the *event*, and specifically an *evental* conception of historical agency as manifesting exceptional irruptions that reverse the priority between history and politics, *i.e.*, that consciously aim to defy history’s inertial momentum.

All of this is highly pertinent to coming to grips with the difficultness of our entrenched neoliberal situation today. But I would contend that, for their part, Horkheimer

and Adorno did not fulfill the fleeting glimpses that they offered of that “positive concept of enlightenment” that could “break through the limits of enlightenment”. I would argue that this is because they were unable, or unwilling, except in certain limited ways, to grasp the full implications of their own analysis. For if it is true that “enlightenment reverts to mythology”, and if hope *is* (correctly) held out that enlightenment might yet be rescued, then the implication must be that it will not be rescued *from* myth, but that it will be rescued, at least in part, *by* myth—that the enlightened enlightenment that we need is not to be attained by redeploing with regard to history the standard (but misguided) Enlightenment gesture of demythification, but something more like remythification (which, when concerned with historical realities such as Jeanne d’Arc, can be thought of as “rememorization”), where the “re-” prefix denotes doing something anew and differently.

To be clear, I am not talking about myth in the common pejorative sense of false beliefs naïvely held, but myth in the broader, *sui generis* sense of ineliminable and epistemically neutral horizons that institute the landscape of precognitive “significance” that forms the background for perceptual experience³. The point is that if enlightened reason is indeed essentially entwined with myth, then its rescue will be a matter of replacing *bad* myth with *good* myth—myth that is more adequate with regard to what we consider to be the appropriate sense of rational enlightenment. This is not a matter of “reenchantment”—at least according to the usual connotation of that term—because in the relevant sense reason was never, and never could be, “disenchanted”, and also because a properly remythified reason would be *less* “enchanted” in any pejorative sense. By critically rethinking historical temporality, we may bust the myth of progress at the level of theory. But at the level of instituting significance—of contouring and highlighting the practical landscape of the lifeworld—we need to replace it with an enlightened myth of the eventuality of historical agency; a sense of the non-emptiness of historical time that will form the background of our historical perception, lest either this eventuality become a matter of theological (or crypto-theological) twaddle, or else, more subtly (and, hence, more dangerously), the framework of temporal homogeneity and the myth of progress remain covertly operative (as in the “remnant core” noted above), however much we may *talk* in vain about the logic of the event. Owing to a variety of reasons, however—not the least of which was how their view of myth in general was at the time overwhelmingly shaped by their experience of specifically *fascist* myth—I suspect that Horkheimer and Adorno were unable to see past the standard opposition between myth and reason, and thus did not develop any clear vision as to how myth itself could possibly form part of a rational and normatively defensible solution to these problems of enlightenment⁴.

For his part, Benjamin *did* have such a vision, but for obvious tragic reasons he was unable to develop it. The glimpses that he had are expressed in some of the most well-known but also cryptic passages of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”; For instance, his claim about a “secret agreement” between past and present generations: “Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” [5] (pp. 245–246). Acting on this weak messianic power would be a form of redemption that involves “a tiger’s leap into the past” [5] (p. 253), in that we need to go backward (in some sense) in order to go forward. The redemptive event occurs in what Benjamin famously called *Jetztzeit* [5] (p. 253) (now-time), and this is what “fills” the historical time that had been misconstrued as “empty”. Now, the notion of messianism in general may sound spooky and ring certain alarm bells, but the idea here would be to uphold a rational (i.e., empirically grounded) belief or faith in historical progress without relying—as most traditions of radical and revolutionary thought unwittingly do—on any crypto-theological assumptions about the future. In other words, the idea would be to disclose concrete moments of reality that lend support to an open-ended and nonlinear view of history—moments that can rekindle and preserve a robustly rational faith in the possibility of socially transformative praxis. Crucial to the sense of Benjamin’s secular messianism is that it is nowise transcendent, but rather fully immanent in the sense that *we* are its locus—*we* embody that weak (i.e., *prima facie*

dispositional) messianic power. Messianism is no longer a matter of *waiting*, but of looking and digging, in the manner of Marx's burrowing "old mole" [1] (p. 198), for strategic openings that are already there in the convoluted historical depths of the present⁵. This outlook, which is closely tied to the practice of immanent critique⁶, gestures toward a dialectical negation of the idea that we are living in a post-historical era ("the end of the end of history"), and I am sympathetic to it for this reason. The main problem, however, is that in its undeveloped state, it can seem weirdly mystical, or even itself to smack of some sort of crypto-theology.

What I do in the next section, then, is consider what the unorthodox or "heretical" [16] Marxism of Daniel Bensaïd may have to offer in terms of clarifying Benjamin's ideas of messianism and *Jetztzeit*. Building on Benjamin's critique of homogeneous, empty time⁷, and following through with the implicit logic of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of enlightenment, Bensaïd laid out a new take on Jeanne d'Arc that amounts to a critical intervention into what I would call the 'mythico-political' [21]—that is, the ineliminable, epistemically neutral horizons of historical significance that have particular bearing on the political dimension. Interpreted in terms of the phenomenology of embodied action, this is an intervention that supports an eventual understanding of historical agency by rendering more concrete what it could mean to say that we are endowed with a "weak messianic power", and what this could mean in relation to the "difficult times" that we face today.

3. Bensaïd and Jeanne

What I am interested in here has to do with the kind of "strategic thinking" that Bensaïd sought to elaborate in the context of the ascent of neoliberal governance in the years after 1989—the year marking the bicentennial of the storming of the Bastille, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the dramatic appearance of Francis Fukuyama's claim, dusted off from Alexandre Kojève's creative misreading of Hegel in the 1930s, about "the end of History"⁸. Although it may be wondered whether Bensaïd's work is outdated from the standpoint of 2023, the underlying sense of the sociopolitical situation in question arguably has not changed fundamentally: a triumphant (if disorderly) capitalist global system, sites of effective resistance to which, though real enough, seem few and far between. Indeed, the dominant features of our current predicament may just be the continuation and intensification of the same neoliberal tendencies. In any case, and more importantly, some of the critical tasks originally imposed by that supposedly post-historical period remain outstanding—first and foremost, locating, beyond abstract utopian visions and wishful thinking, concrete grounds for a rational faith in radical possibilities that would enable us to overcome resigned attitudes to the effect that "there is no alternative". Bensaïd's "strategic thinking" is oriented primarily to this task⁹.

Within this, what I want to focus on in particular is a certain relatively neglected moment in Bensaïd's œuvre, namely, his interest in Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc), primarily in his book *Jeanne, de guerre lasse* [27]¹⁰. Originally published in 1991, this work is the third in a trilogy of books, following *Moi, la Révolution* [29]—a political recuperation of the radicalness of the French Revolution against its domestication as part of the official backstory of the French Republic—and *Walter Benjamin, sentinelle messianique* [17], a philosophical recuperation of Benjaminian messianism that underlies this political stance. *Jeanne, de guerre lasse* can, in turn, be regarded as a strategic application of that messianic outlook. The book takes the form of an extended dialogue consisting of a series of exchanges between Bensaïd and the spectral presence of Jeanne over 23 days, between 8 May—the anniversary of her initial military victory, viz., the breaking of the English siege of Orléans in 1429—and 30 May, the anniversary of her execution in 1431 in Rouen for heresy, relapse, and witchcraft, when she was still not even 20 years old. The conversations, which in a certain way might be said to performatively reenact Jeanne's own paranormal hearing of "voices" (of Saints Michael, Catherine, and Margaret) that originally set her upon her divine mission "to kick the English out of France" and establish the legitimacy of Charles VII, range from her own story and

historical circumstances, to relevant political issues of Bensaïd's own time, and themes that they have in common concerning the existential dimensions of militant engagement.

As a book, *Jeanne, de guerre lasse* defies any easy classification. It is not so much a work *on* Jeanne as a creative polemical intervention into a French national myth that has been the site of ongoing political and ideological contestation for two centuries—in effect, contestation over the meaning and significance of the Revolution itself (and, by implication, the status of its secular personification, Marianne). Since the time of Napoleon, Jeanne has been variously constructed as emblematic of monarchism and republicanism; right- and left-wing nationalism; reactionary conservatism and socialist rebellion¹¹. Her canonization in 1920 was itself a highly politicized event within this process—the culmination of attempts on the part of the Catholic Church to counter anticlerical images of Jeanne and rehabilitate someone once deemed a heretical witch as an exemplary religious figure. Perhaps for this reason, the balance sheet on the myth of Jeanne tilts in favor of conservative views. Although held up as an emblem of the Résistance to Nazi occupation (as well as of anti-Semitism by Pétain), in the latter decades of the 20th century the left felt no particularly strong affinity with someone who, as Voltaire had ridiculed prior to the Revolution, was both zealously religious and a monarchist [38] (pp. 168–172). Tellingly, it was the efforts of Jean-Marie Le Pen to coopt the figure of Jeanne as the political mascot of the *Front National* in the late 1980s that brought her back to the political stage¹², and to respond to this xenophobic appropriation (“she knew how to kick foreigners out!”) was in fact one of the immediate motivations for Bensaïd's book. He sensed the potential political power of myth, or the power of political myth—in particular concerning Jeanne—and that this should not remain an exclusive domain of the right¹³.

For Bensaïd, Jeanne d'Arc is *une affaire non classée* [39]—a case that remains essentially open, in the sense that its meaning is never definitively sewn up and sealed once and for all. Situated in the mythic zone between “history and memory”¹⁴—which is to say, between the factuality of the historical record as such and the normative selectivity of recollection or “rememorization” (a selectivity that is not, however, inconsistent with established facts)—there is an aura of mystery to Jeanne that sets her case up as “the stakes of a permanent dispute and a battle of ideological constructions” [41]. She has become “a powerful mirror in which every epoch sees its reflection” [42]. On this point, Bensaïd was fond of citing Peruvian revolutionary José Carlos Mariátegui's review of Joseph Delteil's 1925 book on Jeanne [33]: “The personalities of history or human fantasies, just like artistic and literary schools and styles, do not have the same fate or the same value in all historical periods. Each period understands and knows them based on their own particular point of view, according to their own state of mind. The past dies and is reborn in each generation” [43]. Bensaïd's aim was to draw on Jeanne to articulate a new mythico-political perspective for *this* generation—for millennials, Gen Z, and beyond. Just as for Mariátegui, “Jeanne d'Arc has come back to us, carried by the wave of our own storm” [43].

The general point here is that myth is not static—not carved in stone, as it were—but rather is historically dynamic. In the case of Jeanne, we can see with particular clarity what Hans Blumenberg called “work on myth” [10]. Whereas the “work of myth” refers to its existential function of providing horizons of significance—in the case of Jeanne, the horizons of historical perception and intelligibility with regard to the sense and meaning of “France” and the political possibilities that open up accordingly (possibilities that would, of course, be radically different for, say, the socialist republicanism of the younger Charles Péguy and the reactionary monarchism of Charles Maurras)—“work *on* myth” refers to its ongoing mythopoetic origins. Myth is not created *ex nihilo*, but is always inherited and “worked on”—at any point, myth's function of providing significance is fulfilled in and through its critical reception and active adaptation to current needs. As a horizon of intelligibility, myth is always geared to the present. It is thus always potentially subject to critical scrutiny—not the same kind of critical scrutiny to which science is subjected, of course, since its function of providing significance is completely different from the function of scientific explanation. Since it does not make truth claims, myth is, strictly speaking,

unfalsifiable. However, it can still be discussed and debated rationally with regard to “[its] *appropriateness* as a means for acting in the present”, where this appropriateness has to do with “the values that [it] purport[s]”—the normative defensibility of the values it involves and how plausibly it suggests their actualizability—and “[its] capacity to create significance *in these particular conditions*”—how well it locates an efficacy in those conditions that connects them to a larger historical vision [44] (p. 184, italics added).

To be sure, myth is often associated with conservative, reactionary, and even fascist politics, and it is disparaged accordingly—guilty by association. There are *prima facie* reasons for this that are not hard to see. However, considered more broadly (as I am doing in this essay), it may be seen that there is nothing intrinsically bad about myth as such, that it has no essential affinity with reactionary politics, and that the misperception that it does have such an affinity may simply stem from the fact that such politics only succeeds (when it does) and grabs our attention when its efforts on the terrain of myth are left conspicuously unopposed. It could be, in other words, that radical politics commits a theoretical and strategic error if it vacates this terrain (the terrain of the mythico-political) in order to pursue an ostensibly more enlightened—because supposedly mythless—politics.

Although he might not have put it exactly this way, such an approach is a pivotal element of Bensaïd’s strategic thinking, and *Jeanne, de guerre lasse* is an important contribution to this. The mythico-political is fraught terrain, and in entering it Bensaïd goes very much against the grain of classical Marxism and other forms of radical critical thought—or at least, in entering it explicitly and self-consciously¹⁵. For, as noted, the mythico-political is always there; it is merely a question of whether we own up to it in order to make it as rationally and normatively defensible as possible, or else acquiesce naïvely to the implicit mythico-political parameters that shore up the status quo. What Bensaïd said about religion—that “religiosity denied without being surpassed will always get its revenge” [27] (p. 107), which is not a wholly original thought by any means—applies to myth as well. The only way to gain a truly critical attitude toward the status quo, especially in difficult times, is to one-up it on the terrain of the mythico-political; this is what it would mean to up the enlightenment ante, and this is what Bensaïd’s encounter with Jeanne does.

It is not possible to summarize Bensaïd’s imagined dialogue with Jeanne here. For present purposes, suffice it to lay out the following three main points:

3.1. *Transitional Times*

First, Bensaïd emphasized how Jeanne lived in a transitional period, straddling the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern world in the Renaissance. There were several aspects to this transition, but in short it was the sort of period in which “a structure of morality, religious representation, and political power is in the process of falling apart, and it is unclear what will come of it” [46] (italics added). It was, in a general sense, “a time of confused values” [27] (p. 57), and Bensaïd thought that the same could be said of our “difficult” post-1989 world: “Today we have the impression of being in a new era of transition”, of experiencing a “crisis of historical time” [47] (p. 287) similarly characterized by an “uncertainty concerning values” [46]. This uncertainty has to do with confusion concerning the relative value of old and new, tradition and innovation, and it is not necessarily a bad thing, of course, as it bespeaks the potentially liberating difficultness of temporally discordant times—something that Bensaïd had Jeanne herself suggest may be the case in general: “epochs are not divided up like sliced bread. There is always something new in the old, something old in the new, things that cross over and overlap” [27] (p. 77). Such was her own experience, at any rate. As Bensaïd suggested to her, “you came into a time in which time itself was no longer time” [27] (p. 109)—it was, in a word, *contretemps*, by which he meant that in such transitional periods, historical time is both “continuous and discontinuous, bringing together its circles and its arrows, its waves and its particles”. It is therefore a “plural time, riddled with surprises, shot full of maybes” [27] (p. 111). This is important because, inasmuch as they are indeed situated “between the no-longer and the not-yet, these uncertain periods are conducive to prodigious marvels and outbursts” [39].

Such times are, in other words, messianic times. And Jeanne was *of* this transition. “Of the world that was ending and the world that was coming into being, neither was mine”, she said. “I cobbled together my own mirage-like world. I was stuck in the gap between two epochs” [27] (p. 60).

Of course, the real Jeanne would never have actually said that at the time. There is a certain measure of ventriloquism in Bensaïd’s “dialogue” with Jeanne. But the crucial point that he wishes to make here is that we should not have any retrospective illusions. The historical Jeanne was not trying to reach that next epoch and thereby advance the course of history such as it is known by latecomers such as us. She obviously was not even aware of it. The future, as such, was not on her radar, and she was certainly not focused on it as the object of historical progress. In particular, the French “nation”, like the modern state, was still something that existed only “in gestation” [27] (pp. 51, 77). Jeanne may have been “the bearer of a popular faith” [46]—of popular traditions that were opposed to feudal oppression and medieval dynasticism, and which were always somewhat heretical—but in terms of expressing “a popular national sentiment at a dynastic time when the nation had no meaning”, she could only “babble” [42]. There was no real social basis for such a sentiment [27] (p. 77). As Bensaïd said to Jeanne, calling out her mirage, “the nation that you heralded was the one bubbling confusedly in the depths of the people” [27] (p. 106)—confusedly, mainly because it took no account of hierarchical class divisions. It was never going to work out in terms of establishing itself historically, and Bensaïd always firmly emphasizes the fact that Jeanne was defeated. Yet, as he continued, “there is in you [. . .] the call of a non-bourgeois possibility”—a possibility that would favor the poor and oppressed majority rather than foreshadowing the bourgeois outcome of the Revolution over three centuries later. “Your faith is not a simple deception. It is the result of a fertile illusion” [27] (p. 107). Situated squarely in her transitional time and guided by her “mirage”, Jeanne’s faith did embody something—namely, a “strange principle of universal resistance” [27] (p. 36) that, in its universality, has a much broader salience and import than any contribution to the rise of French nationalism.

3.2. Embodied Events

Second, although this follows closely from the first point, Jeanne’s actions—those of an illiterate teenage farmgirl leading an army in the 15th century!—were nothing if not events; that is, radically contingent, seemingly impossible interventions that are discontinuous with the linear flow of historical time. Her story is governed by an eventual logic—as Bensaïd said to her, “your heart is set to the rhythm of the event” [27] (p. 86). But little sense could be made of her actions if they were *purely* eventual—if, as Badiou expressed it, “from the point of view of politics, history as meaning or direction does not exist” [48] (p. 37)—nor would they have had any real efficacy at all¹⁶. A meaningful event is not a matter of free-floating contingency. What is crucial is that events be grounded or embedded in the historical present, but not *overly* grounded or embedded there. What we need to come to terms with is how the logic of historical necessity articulates with (not just how it differs from) the logic of eventual contingency, and we would make considerable headway by first of all asking *where* this articulation occurs. The answer, I submit, is in lived embodiment, and here we may need to brush Bensaïd’s thought itself against the grain somewhat. For while he expresses a distinct leeriness with regard to “body” talk, as though it were really just code for mystical forms of social organicism—the body politic, for example, or the Church as the body of Christ—that absorb individuality [27] (p. 108), he nonetheless seems to approach Jeanne implicitly in terms of a critical phenomenology of embodied action.

In his account, Jeanne belongs to those “who refuse to let themselves be kneaded into the identitary substance, who maintain *in their flesh* something of exile and hybridity, who carry their double burden of universal and particular without flinching” [27] (pp. 230–231, italics added). This “double burden of universal and particular” is very much what Merleau-Ponty had in mind when describing lived embodiment in terms of the articulation of the temporally distinct dimensions of “habitual” and “actual” [*actuel*] body [50] (p. 84), where the latter

tends to be associated with undetermined freedom, while the former is more a matter of the body qua organism having internalized aspects of a shared social habitus over time [51] (pp. 61–70). This is usually just the background for individual action, and low-level events that conform to larger historical structures and leave them intact are thus the norm, but the temporally distinct dimensions of corporeality *can* come into an overlapping alignment in such a way that particular actions, in and through the freedom that they manifest, bring an internalized universal normativity to bear against the injustice of currently prevailing historical conditions—they can express a tacit if inchoate imperative to the effect that, as Merleau-Ponty put it, “this *must* change” [*il faut que ça change*] [50] (p. 470, italics added). This is a moment of universal necessity located in the corporeal depths of the present as a sedimentation of the past, and this is how I would suggest that we interpret the principle of resistance that Bensaïd identifies in Jeanne. For what we can see is that in order for its necessity to manifest in the event of her agency, the universality involved must be located *in her flesh*. The body is the chiasmic nexus of necessity and contingency, and we should take this literally—Jeanne *literally* embodies the principle of resistance, and speaking in this way is no mere metaphor or rhetorical flourish.

This literal embodiment of resistance is relatively concrete with regard to some of the things that especially irked Jeanne’s accusers: the fact that she cut her hair short and insisted on wearing men’s clothing. But more deeply, it is a matter of having internalized—incorporated into her bodily being in the form of prereflective intentionalities—the ethical habitus of those movements of popular faith. This is a particular way of seeing Jeanne’s existence that is entirely consistent with established facts, but which can be neither proven nor disproven—again, it is a hypothetical or conjectural mythification or memorization. In this, there seems to be an unmistakable echo of the way in which Merleau-Ponty regarded the death of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who was shot down while on a military reconnaissance flight in 1944. Merleau-Ponty chose to portray Saint-Exupéry’s death as “heroic” in the sense that his voluntary determination to participate in the fight against fascism was an effectively selfless expression of a sedimented universal imperative, and that his action exhibited the same kind of seamless overlap between the habitual and actual dimensions of embodiment [52,53]. It thus did not matter, for example, that Saint-Exupéry’s own political views tended toward conservatism; on the contrary, that fact that the implications of his actions may have left his thinking behind actually casts into sharper relief and, hence, bolsters the suggestion that the embodied imperative in question was indeed universal. In the immediate postwar context, when—like now or in Jeanne’s time—the world felt out of joint and “duties and tasks are unclear” [52] (p. 186), mythifying someone like Saint-Exupéry as a hero generated a kind of perceptual evidence that the prepersonal “flesh” of France—Saint-Exupéry’s term [54] (p. 334), not Merleau-Ponty’s—harbored historically progressive potential. Bensaïd’s Jeanne does something analogous in the 15th-century context, and as with Saint-Exupéry it is immaterial that her own political and metaphysical views strike us today as quite objectionable and, frankly, even ridiculous.

3.3. Resistance through Integrity, Not Martyrdom through Hope

Third, what Bensaïd does find valuable and inspiring in Jeanne—the significance that her myth establishes—has to do with the integrity—the *bodily* integrity—that she displayed in carrying her double burden of universal and particular “*without flinching*”. She was out of place in “dislocated humanity”, being “the opposite principle. Integrity. Wholeness itself” [27] (p. 309). In this, she exhibited “true militancy” in the form of what she described to Bensaïd as “a principle of responsibility”—the subjective flipside of what he called a principle of resistance—that is prior to “the separation between saying and doing, between faith and works” [27] (pp. 93–94). This is a responsibility that would be best understood as based primarily in prereflective bodily intentionality. As Jeanne replied to worries concerning where our principles might be securely anchored, “People always think principles are a beginning, a gesture that starts something from scratch. On the contrary, they are a sequel and a continuation, a gesture that gathers up and extends [. . .] the

irreducible role of culture" [27] (p. 227), the intercorporeal habitus in which we are bodily embedded. Rather than "a sudden burst of will or a moral resurrection", then, "all we need to do is get moving" [27] (p. 306). That particular formulation is obviously somewhat glib, but the point is that there is something almost *instinctive* about what is being talked about here, in the sense of its being motivated in a prereflective and visceral way, but it is equally personal and self-conscious, so there is certainly no metaphysical necessity involved. Rather, what is going on in Bensaïd's account of Jeanne is the transmutation of the structural necessity of history into the necessity of a lived existential imperative. "We don't fight out of hope for a reward or for recognition. We don't calculate profits and interests. *We fight because we have to. To fix an injustice. Because the principle of resistance comes before the principle of hope*" [27] (p. 293, italics added). Bensaïd's Jeanne provides a particularly clear illustration of how the priority of politics (resistance) over history (hope) only makes sense when we construe historical structure in embodied terms (since otherwise history would always carry the day). Embodied imperatives to resist can be found even in times that are experienced as hopeless.

Bensaïd's take on Jeanne's actions is that she resolutely lived out this sort of existential necessity to resist. "You knew from the first step", he said to her, "from the first mile, that once underway you wouldn't stop" [27] (p. 286). Flouting the glacial pace of history, she exhibited a relentlessly impatient intensity, even while knowing that she was rushing headlong toward a cliff. "I lived everything intensely, right up to my death" [27] (p. 189), she said, and in Bensaïd's account she did so without resentment, disdain, or regret. "I learned to live the life I had left, day after day, minute after minute [. . .] I learned to protect every moment against the poison of regret" [27] (p. 313). For Bensaïd, Jeanne's story is thus one of consummate self-realization—there was no other path for her. "I damned myself to save myself" [27] (p. 290).

This view of an existential necessity that leads to integral self-realization is very much in line with the way in which Merleau-Ponty had characterized Saint-Exupéry as a hero—that is, as someone who "lives to the limit his relation to men and the world" by enacting an affirmative response to the question "Shall I give my freedom to save freedom itself? [50] (p. 483). For Merleau-Ponty, heroes are those who "really were outwardly what they inwardly wished to be", and who thus "became one with history at the moment when it claimed their lives" [52] (p. 146). As Merleau-Ponty put it, "Saint Exupéry throws himself into his mission because it is an intimate part of himself, the consequences of his thoughts, wishes and decisions, because he would be nothing if he were to back out. He recovers his own being to the extent to which he runs into danger [. . .] and death, if it comes, will reach him right in the thick of the world" [52] (p. 185).

Bensaïd also adopted the language of heroism in his account of Jeanne. But whereas heroic integrity for Merleau-Ponty involved a melding with the course of history—the heroism manifested by Saint-Exupéry was firmly situated within and conditioned by the context of military victory over Nazi Germany—for Bensaïd, Jeanne's heroism came most clearly into view *after* her military victories. It was in defeat, in prison, at her trial and condemnation, when she was isolated and racked with insecurities and, especially, religious doubt, that Jeanne's militant faith was laid bare and her heroism was most impressive. "The only courage that matters is a courage without God. The courage of doubt" [27] (p. 101). This is because, off the battlefield, where there are far more opportunities to back out and disavow one's faith, the longitudinal perseverance and recurrently reaffirmed commitment to the cause of resistance shines forth all the more brilliantly. Bensaïd thus tells Jeanne that what really makes her an emblematic figure of resistance is "the fragility of your being [and] the uncertainty of your mission" [27] (p. 105). "The inspired heroism of Orléans [the site of her initial military victory] is nothing next to the heroic doubt of Rouen [the site of her imprisonment and trial]" [27] (p. 101). In a way, this is reminiscent of Kant's idea that the good will comes most clearly into focus when duty runs contrary to inclination. But it is much more the case that it illustrates duty *coinciding* with inclination—a personal existential imperative; an "incapacity to do otherwise" built into one's character [55].

Jeanne instantiates authentic self-realization through steadfast political faith. As Bensaïd had Jeanne express back to him the key point, “I do not believe in the aesthetic superiority of defeats. I believe in the political superiority of faithful defeats over victories through disavowal” [27] (p. 295). Although she may have grown weary of fighting [*de guerre lasse*], Jeanne never surrendered. She therefore stands among the “victorious defeated” [46].

Bensaïd’s Jeanne is thus more eventful, so to speak, than Merleau-Ponty’s Saint-Exupéry, for the latter was fortunate to have his lethal heroic action overlap with the victorious outcome of the war. This important difference notwithstanding, however, the key point is the same in each case—it is simply that Bensaïd’s Jeanne makes it even more pointedly: owing to the operative existential imperative, *heroic death is a matter of self-realization, not self-sacrifice*. And more specifically, contrary to virtually all other accounts, *Jeanne was not a martyr*. To regard her as a martyr is to assimilate her into a teleological historical narrative that effectively disincarnates her agency and saps her militant faith of what makes it politically interesting. It would be to concede defeat after all, by tying the significance of her actions to the forward march of history. For Bensaïd, whatever inspiration we may glean from Jeanne’s story has everything to do with how she was called by her voices to do something—to address an injustice—in *the present*, without any sort of historical hope; in the present understood in deeply embodied terms, as the special tense in which the temporally distinct dimensions of embodied existence come into alignment and meld. I would submit that this is Bensaïd’s implicit take on Benjamin’s notion of *Jetztzeit*. The universal normativity of resistance was there, latent in the amorphous ethical habitus of French peasant life as it had developed by the early 15th century. It crystallized in Jeanne, in the predispositionality of her character, as the “weak messianic power” of an imperative responsibility, irrupted into history, and all this without any futural orientation as such. As her impatience attests, Jeanne acted as if there were no tomorrow. For Bensaïd, this is how we should see Jeanne—in effect, as a living anachronism in the sense that her corporeal being literally took her, if not ahead of it, then at least outside of historical time.

Bensaïd’s Jeanne is part of a Benjaminian mythico-political perspective on revolution—an approach that involves disclosing the “weak messianic power” that *we* may possess *now*, even (or especially) in difficult (or temporally discordant) times. Bensaïd’s mythic account of Jeanne is meant to institute horizons of historical perception that can aid in this disclosure by rendering latent universal normativities significant, thereby opening up possibilities for historical agency that would otherwise remain predispositions hidden in the depths of intercorporeal coexistence. Jeanne is not a martyr, but neither is she any sort of model. In setting her up as a mirror for our present, we might say that what Bensaïd is engaged in is a matter of “choosing our heroes”. Putting it this way raises the specter of Heidegger¹⁷, but it differs completely in that it is not at all a matter of “repeating” Jeanne or “following in her footsteps”. As with Merleau-Ponty’s Saint-Exupéry, it would not be amiss to describe the sense of heroism here as a kind of *anti-heroism*, at least in its contrast with more traditional perspectives (which would include that of Heidegger). For there is no sense that these figures are to be emulated, even in principle. It is simply that in laying out the mythical conjecture that they instantiated a weak messianic power in the way described, we can make the strategic “secular prophecy” [47] (pp. 290–291) that there are also possibilities of effective resistance in the here and now—possibilities that could involve our corporeality literally being ahead of its time; our nature being effectively in advance of our history.

There is always *some* such possibility. As Benjamin once wrote, “there is not a moment that would not carry with it *its* revolutionary chance—provided only that it is defined in a specific way, namely as the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new problem. For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation” [57] (p. 402). We simply need to see that situation correctly. We need to see the contemporary world around us *as a “messianic world”*; *as a “world of universal and integral actuality”* [57] (p. 404); *as a world in which another is “gestating”*. And we do this by choosing to see it in intercorporeal terms. This is not to pretend to see anything that is not really there, to simply see what we

want to see, or to fall for our own hype. The account needs to be fully credible to work. But like donning a pair of night-vision goggles, (and having rational confidence that it is not a virtual reality headset), it is to choose to see the world more insightfully in virtue of seeing it in the light of horizons that reveal the otherwise invisible significance of intercorporeally embodied but unactualized normativity. It is to such a regime of historical perception that Bensaïd's Jeanne contributes, and this is the universal import of the principle of resistance that she embodies, which is not really so "strange" [27] [p. 36] after all when we understand it in phenomenological terms. Beyond this, we really have nothing to learn from her. For Bensaïd, his myth of Jeanne would ideally (although he knows it will not) be the final product of the Jeanne myth industry—the myth to end the myths; "we must leave Jeanne to Jeanne" [27] (p. 318) and get on with our own lives.

4. Jeanne as a Figure of Anti-Prometheanism

Events are embodied—this is what, in portraying her in terms of non-martyrial messianism, Bensaïd's account of Jeanne illustrates, and it does so in a way that can help us to refocus our perceptual experience of our own intercorporeal reality and pick out possible sites of weak messianic power today—possibilities for historical agency that do not depend upon hope in historical progress. In closing, I simply want to draw out a more general implication.

The deeper sense of Bensaïd's account of Jeanne is to show that, in concert with how enlightened reason is not premised on a break with myth, historical progress similarly does not involve a break with and growing distancing from nature. In showing that the amalgam of necessity and contingency that is definitive of historical agency can be best made sense of in terms of a phenomenology of embodied action, we can see not only that the human body is the concrete hinge between nature and history, but also—and most importantly—that far from history originating in a break from nature, it would come to an end were any such break to occur. There may therefore be a certain qualified truth in post-historical claims—for inasmuch as history is understood in non-embodied terms, then, like progress, it will only begin when it ends.

We can think about this in connection with the basic problem of radically progressive thought: "how to build the city of tomorrow with the humanity of today?" [27] (p. 74). Traditional answers to this question have an implicitly Promethean character in the sense that just as the titan Prometheus stole the fire from the gods *for* humanity—something that we could never have done on our own—some external factor must intervene in order to bridge the gap implied by historical progress. The general tenor of Prometheanism is therefore messianic in the more traditional theological sense of waiting for an external savior. To be sure, radical thought has often been expressed in a Promethean idiom—this was certainly the case, for example, with the Marxist tradition [58]—and we know that in such cases the *intention* is to say something about human *self*-emancipation. The idea would be that the Promethean moment actually falls within the scope of human action. But without an account of historical agency in embodied terms along the lines that I have (all too briefly) sketched out above, it is hard to see how this intention could be genuinely fulfilled—how the apparent paradox of self-transformation could be resolved—without smuggling in some sort of crypto-theological assumptions. Although I cannot give any detailed argument here, I would contend that the implicit dualism and concomitant somatophobia of any such view would fail to hold up under serious critical scrutiny, and that we would therefore do well to rethink the mythic framework of Prometheanism.

What is valuable and appealing about Bensaïd's Benjaminian myth of Jeanne, then—at least as I have interpreted it in terms of the phenomenology of embodied action—is that it is decidedly *anti*-Promethean, and the same also applies to the broader sense of heroism discussed above. The key idea is that the normative impetus for even radical events is immanent within embodied human coexistence understood in temporally bidimensional terms—it is on this basis that the paradox becomes resolvable. Rather than thinking of history as a second nature and of the political event as the very opposite of nature—and, *as such*, representing the required antidote to the inertial necessity of history—we should think

of historical agency as turning back toward a *closer* connection with nature—specifically, with our own human corporeal nature—and that it can fulfill its innovatory role not despite, but precisely in virtue of this¹⁸.

Benjamin once remarked that rather than being “the locomotive of world history”, revolutions may be “an attempt by the passengers on this train [. . .] to activate the emergency brake” [57] (p. 402). Taken up through the phenomenology of embodied action, this could be interpreted as suggesting that historically progressive agency, rather than following (or even trying to outdo) the Enlightenment in its headlong quest to take ever greater distance from nature—and, a fortiori, its flight from corporeality—will find its vital roots in corporeality and the sedimented past that it carries within itself. It can be taken, in other words, as suggesting that progress today points *back* to nature—in the first place to *our* nature; our habituated organismicity and intercorporeality—as the ground of historical agency¹⁹. This is, in a nutshell, the anti-Promethean moment. Admittedly, there may be a fine line between the temporal bidimensionality of our embodiment and the various forms of dualism that can only mislead and confuse us. But striving to navigate it—by burrowing into it in good mole-like fashion *as* the locus of (Benjaminian) messianic time; *as* hanging in the balance between the no-longer and the not-yet—may be the most strategically effective way of locating real grounds for rational faith in progressive radical change amid the difficult times that we face today.

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Notes

¹ Marx [1] (p. 198).

² See [8] (p. 10) where Bensaïd uses this idea in affirming the distinction between “profane” and “sacred” history.

³ Concerning the phenomenological basis for this view, see Smyth [9]. Concerning “significance”, see Blumenberg [10] (p. 67). Blumenberg had drawn his “principle of significance” from Erich Rothacker, who had expressed it as follows: “Only that which concerns me, that which ‘is something’ to me, that which means something, that which awakens my interest, that touches upon my being, that appears to me as noteworthy, then as memorable, and finally as worthy of the further steps of linguistic and conceptual acquisition [. . .] only that will find an entry point into my world over this first and most elementary threshold” [11] (p. 99); cited in Nicholls [12] (p. 84).

⁴ Although I cannot explore it here, Roger Caillois did glimpse something like this in the context of fascism’s rise in the 1930s—see Caillois [13], reprinted in Caillois [14] (pp. 209–222).

⁵ This is, I think, what Bensaïd is getting at in [15].

⁶ That is, social critique that finds its normative grounds in existing society, rather than extraneous moral norms, and which, thus, turns on the idea of a “normative surplus”—the incomplete actualization of norms to which people are actually already committed.

⁷ See Bensaïd [17]. On Bensaïd and Benjamin, see Traverso [18]; concerning his analyses of temporality in contemporary capitalist society, see McNally [19] and LaFrance and Sears [20].

⁸ Fukuyama [22], published in expanded form in Fukuyama [23]. For a more detailed analysis of the background in Kojève, see Cooper [24]. For a more nuanced view of post-historical claims, see Niethammer [25].

⁹ See Antentas [26] for a pertinent overview of Bensaïd’s work.

¹⁰ My reading of this work is certainly indebted to Antentas’s important discussion [28], which expertly situates Bensaïd’s book within the history of interpretations of Jeanne and shows how it is emblematic of Bensaïd’s oeuvre as a whole. My own focus here is on identifying the need for such an emblem in the first place, and on elucidating the actual political contribution that Bensaïd’s account of Jeanne makes to his project.

¹¹ Some of the more significant French interpretations of Jeanne prior to her canonization were from Jules Michelet [30], Léo Taxil [31], Clovis Hughes [32], Joseph Delteil [33], Charles Maurras [34], and Georges Bernanos [35]. Charles Péguy, who was a particularly important figure for Bensaïd, produced two quite different accounts of Jeanne: the first [36], from 1897, presented a

socialist republican Jeanne, while the second [37], from 1910, following his conversion to Catholicism, presented Jeanne in much more subdued religious terms. On this historical background, see Antentas [28].

12 The *Front National* maintains a highly visible annual May Day tradition of laying a wreath at Emmanuel Frémiet's gilded bronze statue of Joan of Arc in the Place des Pyramides in Paris.

13 Bensaïd was, of course, very wary of the rise of the *Front National*, and he might not have been surprised that Marine Le Pen recently (April 2022) won more than 40% of the vote in the second round of the French presidential election.

14 See especially Bensaïd [17] (pp. 248–249). There is an important connection here with Joseph Mali's work on "mythistory" [40], but I must reserve discussion of this for a subsequent work.

15 A notable exception is Georges Sorel who, in aiming to support a focused revolutionary motivation among workers, proposed recourse to the myth of the general strike as "a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society" [45] (p. 118). The view that I am attributing to Bensaïd here has some affinities with that of Sorel but is meant to be much more immanently grounded.

16 Such is the gist of Bensaïd's critique of Badiou's notion of the event, which he regarded as being overly disconnected from the historical present in a way that "tends to render politics if not unthinkable then at least impracticable" [49] (p. 100).

17 Cf. Heidegger [56] (p. 437): "The authentic repetition of a possibility of existence that has been – the possibility that Dasein may choose its hero – is grounded existentially in anticipatory resoluteness; for it is in resoluteness that one first chooses the choice which makes one free for the struggle of loyally following in the footsteps of that which can be repeated."

18 This would imply the need for a radical dereification of "nature"—see Smyth [59].

19 The sense of the first-person plural in these concluding remarks is more general than as identified at the beginning of the paper, and I certainly do not mean to imply that any solution to the difficulties of the present conjuncture will come from the agency of that narrower sense of "us".

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