

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

GEORGES SOREL:
AN EXAMINATION OF HIS THEORIES
OF KNOWLEDGE AND LANGUAGE

by

MARGARET PEYTO

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for
the Degree of Master of Arts

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

May, 1982

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
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MASTER OF ARTS

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INTRODUCTION

One of the truisms of history is that there is a need for a constant reassessment and revision of the reputation of men, especially as the decades pass since their death. In the 1970's, such a re-evaluation began on the eccentric, syndicalist philosopher, Georges Sorel, the object of controversy and dissension for many years. Sorel was regarded by his contemporaries, and is still regarded today, as a man whose thought had elements of anarchism, socialism, Marxism, moralism, sociology, fascism, pluralism, conservatism, irrationalism, and pragmatism. Because he could not be placed firmly in any category, Sorel had remained an intriguing enigma. Perhaps one of the safest statements that can be made about Sorel is that almost no one who has ever come in contact with his writing has regarded him with neutrality. He has either aroused immense interest and enthusiasm, albeit mixed with confusion, or intense hostility.

Even many of the most obvious details of Sorel's life remain shrouded in obscurity, with his acquaintances providing conflicting evidence. Sorel was a reticent man, except in an intellectual sense; and since few attempts have been made to decipher his family background, or his

first career as an engineer, many of the most elementary facts of his life are unknown, especially as his entire life was spent in an extremely modest manner. Born in Normandy in 1847, the cousin of the French historian Albert Sorel (and Georges Sorel regarded himself also primarily as an historian), Sorel worked as an engineer for the Ponts et Chaussées until his early retirement in 1892. Until his death he lived near Paris, working as a journalist and social philosopher, first in association with the anarcho-syndicalists, and then for a brief period around 1910 to 1912 in semi-friendship with some members of the Right. During his life in Paris he was involved on the fringe of a number of movements, particularly Marxism and syndicalism. When he died in 1922, in a Paris apartment, he was hailed with equal respect from the right-wing l'Action Francaise and the socialist journal La Vie Ouvrière.

Sorel is an interesting subject of historical study for at least four reasons. In Paris, he was in close contact with a considerable number of leaders of French socialist and literary circles, ranging in political stripe from men like Fernand Pelloutier, the first head of the syndicalist Bourses du Travail, to the Catholic writer Charles Péguy. As one historian, James Meisel, has also pointed out, his literary friendships with men like Vilfredo Pareto and Benedetto Croce were unrivalled. Secondly, Sorel

stood at a point where many doctrines and ideologies met, as, for example, the revisionism of Marxism and the emergence of revolutionary syndicalism. Thirdly, he was valuable as a prophet, for not only did he incorporate categories in his thought that anticipated the rise of fascism, he was also considered to have directly influenced fascists like Mussolini (or less directly, Marxists like Lenin). Finally, as the recent increased interest in Sorel indicates, his effect was not only felt in the 1930's, but also in the unrest in the 1960's, and indirectly in the terrorist movements of the 1970's.

One of the arguments of this thesis is that although Sorel's socialist and anarcho-syndicalist philosophy has been fruitfully considered, his position as a genuine member of the fin de siècle, irrationalist climate of opinion has been often ignored. He has usually been considered as an anti-rationalist, a skeptic, or an aloof historian. Those critics who have called him an irrationalist have stressed how he differed from rationalist thought, but have not concentrated on his doctrine per se, or else have looked at his irrationalist influence on later periods. One of his two most famous doctrines, that of the myth (the other is his recognition of violence in man) has often been slurred over in appraisals of Sorel.

The aspect of Sorel that has not yet been considered, and which this thesis will address, is his

recognition that language is an imprecise method with which to grasp the nature or strength of the unconscious, whether in an individual, or in a political or social sense. Sorel was searching for a means of describing the motivations of men, but he believed that ideas, emotions and beliefs could not be described in a clear, precise, analytical language. Just as he believed man's knowledge and abilities were limited, so, too, was language, and therefore it was necessary to construct a new form of communication. Sorel never devised a coherent philosophy of language. However, by examining his beliefs together with the similar linguistic theories of his English translator, the critic and imagist poet, T. E. Hulme (1883-1907), and those of the Italian historian, Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), whom Sorel admired greatly, it is possible to arrive at a limited description of his philosophy, and, as well, to illustrate the concurrent and historical character of such ideas. This emphasis upon language and communication in Sorel's work, which was partly based on his scientific theories and partly on his artistic theories, has been neglected in the importance attached to the lack of unity in his political theories.

Before examining Sorel's theories on language, a brief summary of the historiography of this perplexing thinker will be made, in order to illustrate the problems that historians have encountered in trying to place him in a specific category, or in generalizing about his type of mind.

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CHAPTER I
A SURVEY OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY
OF GEORGES SOREL

Since the day in 1892 when Georges Sorel retired as a civil engineer and moved to Paris to begin a second career as a writer and social philosopher, historians have been hard pressed to arrive at a common interpretation of him. All elements of the man, (whether they be his intellectual and political development, his influence on contemporary or later movements, the importance of his ideas, or even the most ordinary details of his life), have given grounds for considerable disagreement. A study of the literature on Sorel frames the picture of a solitary, withdrawn, non-conforming mind, a man interpreted in almost as many ways as there are commentators. (This picture, which is not very accurate, largely appears to have originated in a one-sided quarrel with Charles Péguy in 1912.)¹ For example, he has been variously labelled as a modern Machiavellian,² "le dernier grand penseur du socialisme,"³ "an anomalous figure,"⁴ "the enfant terrible of modern political theory,"⁵ the "enigme du vingtième siècle,"⁶ and "the absolutely unclassifiable Georges Sorel."⁷ Even

the passage of time has led to no clarification. Yet throughout the past seventy years the appeal of this odd, eccentric thinker has not died. Indeed, in the 1960's and the 1970's, with the appearance of the "New Right" and terrorist movements, there has been a resurgence of interest in Sorel, and particularly in his theories on violence, which has even led to the republication of some of his books.

Today, as in his lifetime, Sorel is most popular in Italy, which still possesses the largest Sorelian literature. Unfortunately, since only the book published by Max Ascoli in 1921 has been translated into French, the Italian studies of Sorel remain largely unknown in France, Britain or North America. This linguistic barrier has added to the difficulty of compiling Sorel's work, much of which remains scattered in numerous semi-forgotten journals.

In England, the literature on Sorel has never been profuse, despite the fact that Sorel was himself interested in English conditions and the English character, partly through the influence of Marx and Engels. By and large, most of the analysis is found in survey volumes of socialism, French history or political thought. There have been no full length critiques or biographies of Sorel written in England, although since 1965 a number of interesting articles have very usefully examined specific aspects of his thought, such as his theories on violence and work.⁸

In the United States Sorel was a neglected figure until after the Second World War, when a number of articles and books appeared. In the 1950's and 1960's, he was more popular in the American academic world than anywhere else outside Italy. The American literature on Sorel unfortunately suffers from this academic tinge. It is largely characterized by political or sociological analysis, with little or no treatment of Sorel as a man, or his position among his contemporaries. As well, there have been studies of Sorel from countries as diverse as Brazil, Canada, Spain, Australia, Norway, and Poland.

The strangest neglect of Sorel has occurred in France, which is parallel to his treatment there during his lifetime. A rash of articles, books, and memoirs concerning Sorel appeared in the 1920's, but since that time there have been periods when he was conspicuously ignored, though there have been the writings of Pierre Andreu in France and Georges Goriely in Belgium. Like T. E. Hulme,⁹ another fringe figure, Sorel often appeared in memoirs of his contemporaries. Usually only those writers like Pierre Andreu or Georges Valois¹⁰ who knew him personally paid him much attention. Unlike the English, the French works have often regarded Sorel only as a revolutionary syndicalist, or proto-Fascist, and not as an influence, even if indirectly, on men like Albert Camus. In the preface to The Wretched of the Earth by Frantz Fanon,

the very influential book on violence of the 1960's, Jean-Paul Sartre dismissed Sorel's theories on violence, with contempt, as "fascist utterances."¹¹ The notable French historian, Jules Monnerot, who rather uniquely placed Sorel among the great thinkers of the century, condemned the French intelligensia, particularly those on the left, for their ignorance of Sorel. Sarcastically he added that it was not only in primitive societies that there existed "la peur des morts."¹²

Until the mid-1950's, most of the literature on Sorel was largely in the form of personal memoirs, or else criticisms of his fascist or syndicalist position. Generally, the literature in the period around the Second World War was more intolerant and vituperative. For the next ten years many writers concentrated on the entire body of Sorel's work, trying to fit it into some sort of consistent pattern, such as that of anarchism or socialism. Since 1965, the trend has been to examine only specific aspects, such as his concept of the myth, his views on violence or art, or his position in relationship to earlier thinkers like Pierre Joseph Proudhon or contemporaries like Gustave Le Bon.¹³ On the whole, the critiques of the 1960's and the 1970's expressed more certainty that there was a logical coherence to Sorel's ideas than earlier ones had done. They were less preoccupied with criticizing his shifts from Marxism to syndicalism, to the right, and back to socialism,

believing that he only looked at these groups as a means, not an end, to accomplish a fixed purpose.

One characteristic of the Sorelian historiography to date is that much of it is an elaboration of Sorel's political or social theories, with few attempts to place him in his age. For example, his philosophies are often quoted at length, but examples of what he was fighting against are seldom given. Usually he is treated in isolation, apart from his connections with syndicalism or Marxism, with the notable exceptions of books like Consciousness and Society, or Visions of a New Hero.¹⁴ Many studies are of a political, not an historical, nature. Even those writers who admired Sorel felt that he was obscure, but for them it was not important, whereas his critics could not get by the obscurity. Gaudeno Megaro, who denied much of Sorel's purported influence on Mussolini, felt that Sorel had far more of an impact on humanitarian, pacifist historians than he did on the syndicalists or anarchists, simply because the latter groups were already familiar with these types of ideas.¹⁵

On the whole, commentators have classified Sorel in three general fashions: as the possessor of a particular ideology (such as syndicalism, socialism, Marxism, fascism, or anarchism); as a thinker ruled by a particular quality (such as irrationalism or moralism); or as a man possessing a variety of traits representative of the twentieth-

century, such as his belief in violence. Some of the literature on Sorel will be surveyed in Chapter I in order to illustrate, firstly, the extent of the confusion surrounding Sorel; and secondly, to show how much of this literature deals with Sorel's political and social beliefs, and not with his philosophy concerning man's knowledge of life in general. It is necessary to bear in mind that attempts to categorize Sorel are largely doomed to failure.

i. The Social and Political Theories of Sorel

a. Sorel: The Philosophyer of
Revolutionary Syndicalism

One method that many commentators have used in interpreting Sorel is to place him within the framework of a specific ideology, such as socialism or syndicalism. This is a logical manner in which to treat Sorel since he regarded himself for the greater part of his intellectual career as a genuine Marxist, but problems arise when the shifts in position in his intellectual career are considered. Some critics prefer to stress the sympathy he showed towards the proto-fascist Action Française around 1912, or his acknowledgement of the incipient power of Mussolini. The difficulty of placing Sorel within a specific framework is demonstrated by the apocryphal story of his grave stone and the proposed restoration of it by both the Bolshevik and Italian governments in the 1920's.¹⁶

The first ideology to be considered will be that of anarcho-syndicalism, since this is the label most frequently applied to Sorel, certainly by French historians or by survey volumes of intellectual history of the period. Sorel's most famous work, Reflections on Violence, was written during the peak of his interest in syndicalism, and since syndicalism never had more than a minor impact, the message of the book has tended to become obscured.

In 1925 Georges Michael¹⁷ treated syndicalism as a natural outgrowth of French economic and political conditions in the two decades preceding the First World War. French industry was backward, socialism was very nationalistic, and the industrial proletariat was a small isolated group in the midst of a predominantly rural and petit-bourgeois culture. Because the syndicalists were isolated so, too, was Sorel, although he was never to escape the strong traditions and influences of the French provincial bourgeoisie. According to Michael, Sorel promoted the education of a proletarian group which was to be used as a revolutionary tool in the future, simply because he was aware of the enormous material deficiencies of the syndicalist movement, and the gap that only revolutionary means could bridge.

A number of historians have dismissed Sorel as a syndicalist, or certainly as a major influence on syndicalism, because he did not have much contact with the actual militant leaders. However, the French historian Robert Goetz-Girey¹⁸

believed that the syndicalist philosophers were actually very close in theory to the militants and aided them by publicising the cause. Both militants and theorists wrote for the same paper, Mouvement Socialiste. As well, Sorel was a personal friend of the influential leader, Fernand Pelloutier. The two groups shared the same theories, such as the gulf that must be consciously maintained between the bourgeoisie and the intellectuals: the expansion into a free society with a federalist base: and the use of a general strike and of violence as a means of attack. According to Geotz-Girey, syndicalism did not remain a powerful force because of the lack of internal cohesion: the unrealistic belief in the natural goodness of man, similar to that of the anarchists; and the impossibility of running everything without recourse to an impartial power, such as the state.

A contemporary of Sorel's who primarily regarded him as "the theoretician of revolutionary syndicalism," was Antonio Gramsci, the founder of the Italian Communist party. Although Gramsci did not agree with all of Sorel's theories, he regarded Sorel as "a disinterested friend of the proletariat" and the possessor of the virtues of two earlier socialists, having as he did "the harsh logic of Marx and the restless, plebian eloquence of Proudhon."¹⁹ Gramsci disliked Sorel's followers, but felt that Sorel was not responsible for their "spiritual meanness and crudity."²⁰

A common approach towards Sorel the syndicalist was to dismiss syndicalism itself as a movement of little importance. For example, the English writer, Vernon Lee, in 1911, scornfully stressed the difference between French or Latin ideas, and English good sense or reason. Sorel's syndicalism was only a "very significant kind of revolutionary ideal-mongering"²¹ while the myth of the general strike was willed by philosophers, something "they have made out of their own brain fumes, their own burnt pinch of historical mummy-dust."²² Myths were simply blunders, and syndicalism a revolt against social improvement and humanitarianism. Often Anglo-Saxon historians dismissed syndicalism as peculiarly a French movement which had little or no relevance for non-Latin countries. The only innovative concept of Sorel's, they said, was the myth of the general strike which was nothing more than a slogan. Both syndicalism and Sorel were products of the French revolutionary tradition which included "too many pictures of revolutionary heroes storming the barricades with wide-open mouths."²³ The great gap in the logic of syndicalism was the belief that élan or impulsiveness could ever win victories. Since syndicalism was so lacking in strength it was easy to dismiss Sorel in a patronizing manner as a suburban bourgeois who used events and ideas such as the general strike, the Bolshevik Revolution, or the March on Rome merely as "escapist devices from the slothful slough of modern civilization."²⁴

b. Sorel the Marxist

Sorel has also been classified as a Marxist thinker, rather than the more specialized syndicalist. In the sense used by some commentators on Sorel, Marxism is a very broad definition, rather than a narrow party line. Sorel was always greatly interested in Marxian ideas, being, in fact, one of the first French intellectuals to introduce Marx to France. The sentiment was not often reciprocated by other Marxists. For example, at the time of his death in 1922 he was described by the Communist International as a "reactionary petty-bourgeois Proudhonist and anarcho-syndicalist."²⁵

One of the earliest British critics of Sorel, the anti-Fabian Bertrand Russell,²⁶ concluded that Sorel was part of a two-pronged attack on Marxism, an attack which accused Marxism of being out of touch with new conditions at the turn of the century. Sorel and the revolutionary-syndicalists attacked Marxism from without, while the attack from inside was led by the revisionist school of Edouard Bernstein. After reading The Decomposition of Marxism and Reflections on Violence, Russell decided that, according to Sorel, the essential and core belief of Marxism is the class war which must be retained at any price. However, in the end, Russell lamely concluded that Sorel had abandoned Marxism and become a royalist.

Sammy Beracha's book was originally written as

notes for a course at a syndicalist school at Toulouse for which Beracha proposed the name École G. Sorel. Beracha classified Sorel as "le grand théoricien du syndicalisme révolutionnaire" but since he was concerned with the position of Marxism in the world, the polarization into two armed camps, for and against Marxism, and between Marx and Nietzsche, he looked at Sorel not as a syndicalist, but as a Marxist standing outside the main line of descent.²⁷ Sorel was not interested in economic forces but only in the class struggle, and therefore helped in deforming the exact thought of Marx. "Le sorélisme est une doctrine basée sur la psychologie du prolétariat, alors que le marxisme est entièrement construit sur les conditions économiques en évolution."²⁸ However, Sorel had an enormous influence on the development of Marxist thought because he demonstrated for the first time that the idea of the class struggle cannot be separated from Marxist economics.

Two other historians who concluded that Sorel was fundamentally a Marxist were the famous Italian scholar and friend of Sorel's, Benedetto Croce,²⁹ and the American, Jacques Barzun. For Barzun, Sorel was also one of the leading sociologists of his time who had passionately attempted to salvage Marx by devising a scientific sociology.³⁰ His major preoccupation was solving the problems arising from Marxism, not that of removing Marxism. Like Barzun and Russell, Croce regarded Sorel as a Marxist

who was also one of "the more cautious Marxists"³¹ along with Kautsky and Bernstein.³²

c. Sorel the Anarchist Revolutionary

Sorel has also been classified as having elements of anarchist thought, partly because of his ties with the syndicates. However, George Woodcock, in his major history of anarchism, concluded that Sorel was only on the fringe of anarchist thought, since he could have moved either right or left. He was really a social philosopher, rather than a syndicalist philosopher, who tried to reconcile Marx, Bergson, and his own thought through anarchism. The general strike was not important but the social myth was. Through ideas such as the belief that in violence and extreme moments man finds himself, Sorel foreshadowed Malraux and Sartre.

Although Sorel based a new Marxian philosophy on a social and ethical revolution, as well as on an economic and political one, for one French historian, Jacques Rennes, Sorel's philosophy was of less significance than his revolutionary traits. In common with one wing of anarchism he was primarily and predominantly a revolutionary, although he was a revolutionary who merely followed the class struggle with a passionate interest and did not become physically involved. "Sa direction philosophique est d'une absolute netteté. Il est révolutionnaire-né; il voudrait provoquer un renversement dans l'idéologie."³³

Sorel did have a lot in common with the anarchists,

and with respect to his romantic nature was closer to the anarchists who advocated a violent revolution than to the methodical trade union organizers with whom he was only in contact for a few years. To later critics he was not an anarchist, but "a paradoxical figure . . . a man of the left who ended up nearer to the right,"³⁴ whose place lay with Mussolini, not with Kropotkin or Pelloutier, but by many anarchists of his own age he was regarded with respect and sympathy as "le seul penseur socialiste."³⁵ George Valois, a notable figure because of his subsequent connections with French fascism in the 1920's,³⁶ regarded Sorel as a strong formative influence on many of the leading anarchists in France in the decade before the First World War. When Sorel died, Valois said of him, "I bow and pray before the tomb of the man to whom I owe so much."³⁷ A contradiction in Sorel's nature is visible here, since if anarchists like Valois regarded Sorel so highly, why did a number of them turn to fascism. Even Valois recognized this anomaly and said of Sorel, "il sera toujours malaisé de définir Sorel . . . c'est un écrivain qui échappe à toute définition."³⁸

d. Sorel the Prophet of Fascism

One label which has been frequently applied to Sorel, and which, more than anything else, has contributed to his neglect, has been that of fascism. Since the ascension to power of Mussolini in 1922, argument has raged concerning the influence of Sorel on the rise of fascism in the

twentieth century, especially in Italy where his influence was greater than in France, and where a number of his supporters became followers of Il Duce.

One side of the attack is that Sorel, and his two main theories of violence and the myth, contributed to the Zeitgeist, to the pre-war Italian intellectual and spiritual uneasiness, while the other is that Sorel "contributed nothing to the mental hodge podge that was Mussolini"³⁹ and that "the fascist corporate states has little in common with Sorel's society of syndicates."⁴⁰

To a number of scholars, Sorel's myth was his major proto-fascist creation since they felt that the Italian fascists and Hitler adopted it, and adapted it for political use. According to them, Sorel's ideas were of importance because the myth was his alone and was not part of the intellectual climate of opinion. Although Sorel was not a fascist, he was "one of the first to apply philosophical irrationalism directly to politics."⁴¹

Hitler's Weltanschauung, which he had partly acquired through the influence of Mussolini, was nearly the same thing as the myth, also possessing the qualities of no compromise, total acceptance, dogmatic intolerance, and fanaticism.⁴² Furthermore, since Sorel was a "conservative" (because he was opposed to state intervention in all spheres) and since "it is a statement valid without exception that all thinkers even remotely connected with fascism and

its precursors have been prompted by conservative instincts,"⁴³ then Sorel, like Pareto and Spengler, had cleared the path to fascism.

These three thinkers all shared "the root fact of fascism--the feeling of the pointlessness of positive effort."⁴⁴ They were part of the group of pathetic modern thinkers who had lost the noble beliefs of former periods. Not only were they outside the liberal-democratic tradition, they were outside the socialist one as well. The quest for certainty, which was carried out in an atmosphere of doom, led steadily in one direction, a direction frightening for all good liberals. Not only did this lead indirectly to Mussolini but also directly to the philosophy of "a genuine and full-blooded Fascist"⁴⁵ like Georges Valois. Therefore, to those historians who regarded Sorel as the prophet of fascism, his opposition to hypocrisy, and his creation of the myth easily turned into the glorification of direct action, absolute abstract thinking, Blut und Boden racism, and violence without end.

e. Sorel the Sociologist

Despite Sorel's highly contemptuous opinions of sociology, he has been classified occasionally as a sociologist himself. This approach is particularly common in American academic circles, although it was also the conclusion of Jean Deroo who found that despite Marxism being "l'épine dorsale de l'oeuvre de Sorel,"⁴⁶ his primary preoccupation

was a sociological study of contemporary society. Historical materialism was only a sociological method. Sorel was a sociologist who attempted to describe, without a partisan spirit, the conditions that he saw about him. However, his sociological studies did become embellished with moralistic overtones.

In one of the major American books on Sorel, Irving Horowitz, an American professor of sociology, wrote a highly critical polemic on Sorel's political sociology. Horowitz was totally opposed to Sorel, not only in his philosophical and intellectual structure, but also in spirit, since Horowitz, a firm admirer of rationalism and democracy, could find no justification for any defence of irrationalist doctrines. Sorel was "essentially a minor figure in the history of ideas,"⁴⁷ since some of his ideas, such as syndicalism, were soon proven useless with greater industrialization, but mainly because Sorel lacked "any sense of construction"⁴⁸ and was torn between "descriptive and prescriptive elements."⁴⁹ "He sacrificed precision at every junction. Never too clear as to his own motivations, he transmitted these into his work in the form of unresolved paradoxes."⁵⁰

Although Horowitz felt that Sorel was a firm supporter of the irrationalist doctrines which he defined, other critics believed that he was a philosopher who studied non-rational elements in human behavior, not an irrationalist thinker per se. For example, like Gustave Le Bon,

Sorel had studied mass behavior from a psychological point of view, particularly massive popular involvement in politics. Using the same methodology, Sorel and Le Bon had arrived at similar conclusions on the re-evaluation of science, and the importance of irrational or non-rational components in mass psychology in historical movements. Unfortunately, as well as being "prophets for the epoch to come,"⁵¹ "both Sorel and Le Bon had a significant influence on totalitarian political theory beyond French borders in the twentieth century,"⁵² since their studies laid the groundwork for the rise of totalitarian systems.

A far more generous study done on Sorel's sociology was that of Jules Monnerot, a leading French historian and sociologist, in a study of Sorel's development of the concept of the myth, and of Sorel the sociologist, not Sorel the political theorist. Monnerot believed that critics should be very careful where they placed Sorel, as he resisted strongly being categorized as either Right or Left. Too many historians have looked at certain objects that he studied, such as the syndicat, and not at the scope of his vision. Where Sorel differed from other sociologists who studied the myth, such as Durkheim, was that he studied the myth in action and tried to get inside it, not just regarding it as a paleontologist would a fossil. Therefore, according to Monnerot, Sorel's myths have a future where the other myths do not. The great distinction between

Sorel and other philosophers is that he realized that myths were always present, not just existing in the past or among primitive people. He was 'l'opticien par excellence des grands mythes du vingtième siècle."⁵³ Sorel shares the same fate as thinkers like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Mosca or Pareto. One can specialize in la connaissance or in la puissance but those who specialize in la connaissance de la puissance enter a dangerous field where their reputations are continuously attacked.

f. Sorel the Political Theorist

For those critics who have preferred to treat Sorel primarily as a political theorist, the comparison with Machiavelli has been habitual. As a political theorist, it has been easier to group Sorel either in a particular line of descent, such as from Machiavelli; or with a specific group of his contemporaries, such as with Mosca, Michels, and Pareto, although even here he is regarded as standing slightly on one side, being by nature a "political extremist."⁵⁴ Like Machiavelli he acknowledged the essential existence of force in politics, and the possibility of using conflict and strife as a means of regenerating society. Politics was seen as a form of warfare. "This emphasis upon conflict represents a radical break with the classical-medieval tradition of political thought, and is distinctively modern."⁵⁵ Like Pareto, Mosca, and Michels he did not accept words or ideas at face value, but searched behind for their hidden intent.

However, for one writer at least, Sorel was primarily apolitical, since while Machiavelli had hoped to eliminate uncertainty by a rational legal order, Sorel "possesses no vision beyond the anarchy of the class struggle, beyond the heroic brotherhood forged in battle with the bourgeoisie, and the joy of creation in the workshop."⁵⁶

Apart from his indirect descent from Machiavelli, Sorel was also seen as the logical successor to those French political writers who shared an intrinsic aversion to government, power, and the belief in "natural law". Sorel's views on progress, syndicalism, and the general strike, and his fear of power and his desire for its destruction were more extreme than similar ideas held by Tocqueville and Proudhon. However, all three thinkers were united by the same dislike of the centralization of power, and all three adopted and expanded the idea that power is inherently evil. According to this viewpoint Sorel was not an original thinker, as all his ideas were taken from someone else, and although he had a broad knowledge, it was quite shallow.

ii. Sorel the Rational Irrationalist

Some critics have preferred not to fit Sorel into an ideological grouping such as syndicalism or socialism but have tried to place him in the movement at the turn of the century that attacked rationalism and intellectualism, stressing the irrational nature of political behavior and emphasizing the power of intuition, violence, energy, and

personal and moral forces. In this light Sorel was occasionally seen as a misinterpreted rationalist. Usually those critics who placed him in the irrationalist fold also regarded him as a forerunner of fascism.

John Bowle saw Sorel as an irrational anti-intellectual, irresponsible and destructive, whose ideas were unthinkable in the complex organization of modern industrialization with its need for international order. "In history he saw no plan and little progress; in politics only improvisation: in ideas only myth. This dark revolutionary was to provide Fascism with a much needed political philosophy. He was to make a major contribution to the disasters of the twentieth century."⁵⁷

Another influential historian, Leszek Kolakowski, called Sorel a Jansenist Marxist, a destroyer not a builder, and the creator of the myth, which is irrational emotionalism. The myth was "an attack of sentiment against analytical reason in general."⁵⁸ Sorel was an illustration of how the extreme forms of left-wing and right-wing radicalism eventually converge.

The attempt to classify Sorel as an irrationalist or a rationalist generates more conflict than efforts to place him in other categories. For example, two modern reviewers have examined the influence of Vico's theories of history upon Sorelian concepts and have arrived at two radically opposing conclusions. According to Patrick

Hutton, Sorel, who lacked "the irony and grandeur of Vico's conception"⁵⁹ of history denied the rational side of thought. Through re-examining Marx while under the influence of Vico, Sorel eventually classified Marxism as another form of mythology (although he did not abandon Marxism).

Using the same methodology as Hutton, Richard Vernon concluded that Sorel had been mistakenly considered as an irrationalist whereas in the context of his philosophy of history he was "a rationalist manqué, who tried to retain the substantive ambitions of nineteenth century philosophies of history while skeptically narrowing the scope of reason."⁶⁰ Sorel's development of two concepts of history, the causal or psychological, and the retrospective or scientific, anticipated the future interpretations of structuralism and phenomenism. Syndicalism and violence were also rational elements since syndicalism was part of the rational, technological world while violence was a means to separate this rational world from the irrational, external world of man and nature.

Attempts to portray Sorel as either a rationalist or an irrationalist were also made through examining the influence that either Bergson or Nietzsche had upon his thought. An enormous number of writers had supposedly influenced Sorel--such as Taine, Renan or Proudhon--but Bergson and Nietzsche are the two names to which he is

most commonly tied. For example, the English reviewer, Arthur Lewis, in a contemporary account of syndicalism, said that Sorel was a Bergsonian before he had ever read Bergson,⁶¹ while Genevieve Bianquis, in a study of Nietzsche's influence in France, thought that Sorel had acquired from Nietzsche, even if indirectly, the idea of struggle and the revolution of the slave class.⁶² Sorel was also said to have adopted one of the significant elements of twentieth century thought, the cult of personalism, of personal leadership, as advocated by Bergson and Nietzsche. Sorel had supposedly been greatly influenced by Bergson's vitalist philosophy, adopting the Bergsonian psychological epistemology in order to examine Marxism.⁶³ His revolutionary theories had been influenced by Bergson's revolutionary psychology.

iii. Sorel the Moralist

Some of the most intriguing appraisals of Sorel are those which describe his religious or moralistic qualities. By applying the classification of moralist to him, critics have no longer felt obliged to force him into a specific mould, such as on the right wing or left wing of political thought. Just as with other labels, like Marxism or irrationalism, the title of "moralist" can have a wide variety of connotations.

In 1907 Benedetto Croce discussed Sorel's position as a moralist. "Ce qui, à mon avis, caractérise Sorel est

la conscience, chez lui la plus vive, des problèmes moraux."⁶⁴ Although Sorel would never parade himself as a moralist, and although he disliked moralistic and literary vanity, he wrote to Croce in agreement: "vous avez notamment très bien reconnu quelle est la grande pré-occupation de toute ma vie: la genèse historique de la morale."⁶⁵ According to Croce, all the pet hatreds of Sorel --the politicians, intellectuals, Jacobins, Marcus Aurelius, Renan, etc.,--had supported transitory values and material interests that did not conform with reality, only with rhetoric. Sorel, on the other hand, admired "une morale austère, sérieuse, dépouillée d'emphase et de bavardages."⁶⁶

Like Croce, a number of contemporaries of Sorel, or critics writing in the 1920's, stressed the moralistic aspect. In 1909, Ernest Dimnet, in an attempt to make Sorel's name and work more widely known to the English public, praised Sorel as a hard-headed engineer with a respect for facts and reality who nevertheless possessed "a moral doctrine nearly akin to Jansenism."⁶⁷ Sorel had built his philosophical system on ethical motives, and although he had mistaken the character of the proletariat, his "reintroduction of morals into the metaphysics of labor is a wonderful change for the better."⁶⁸ In one of the first full length studies of Sorel, Gaetan Pirou agreed with Dimnet's assessment of the original technical slant to Sorel's thought, and arrived at a parallel conclusion

that Sorel was "un moraliste, âpre et sévère."⁶⁹ A major German critic of Sorel's, Michael Freund, also thought that moralistic and Christian concepts characterized Sorel more than anti-clerical ideas: the pessimism, the heroic energy which necessitates the struggle against evil and sin which are the eternal values that no human transformation can abolish, the sense of sacrifice.⁷⁰ To Roger Soltau, Sorel was essentially a "moralist and a psychologist, more interested in the motives of human actions than in their practical aspects."⁷¹ On the centenary of his birth, it was said of Sorel that "le but de ce révolutionnaire est une révolution morale."⁷² Essentially he had the same aims as Charles Péguy, both of them being "des champions de la force d'âme,"⁷³ but whereas Péguy had accented l'âme, Sorel had emphasized la force.

As the title of his book suggests, Richard Humphrey, the American author of Georges Sorel: Prophet Without Honor, was somewhat partial to Sorel. One of the first Americans to devote a complete work to Sorel, he concluded that Sorel was not only "one of the most provocative and baffling figures of modern thought,"⁷⁴ but also, with Nietzsche and Freud, one of the great prophets of the modern age.⁷⁵ Humphrey believed that critics had failed to reach beneath the surface of Sorel's thought, where, if they had done so, they would have found an essential unity, a search for a new system of ethics.

Sorel's work was held together by a search for those things that would halt the movement towards degeneration. This belief in the endless conflict between degenerate nature and the heroic, free episodes of man's history is the "key" to all the "apparent inconsistencies of Sorel's thought," the "myth" that "provided the inner meaning and dynamic force to all his thought and work."⁷⁶ Since liberation is possible only through action, Sorel as a thinker was dominated by great fluidity; and Humphrey condemned those philosophers who attempted to "analyze his writing as if they were separately formulated philosophic systems."⁷⁷

Sorel the moralist could also be seen in an intensely unflattering light, as a hypocrite who had no deep ties to any of the groups and principles which he professed to believe, such as syndicalism. This slightly pathetic figure, isolated in his "garret" at Boulogne-sur-Seine was "egoistic as a philosopher and ambitious as a moralist."⁷⁸ He was self-distrustful and timid, yet wanted society to be "self-sacrificing, self-confident, and heroic."⁷⁹ Even his villains were the projections of his own personality (with the implication by these critics that they did not exist otherwise.) He was a hypocrite when he asked the syndicates to ignore material claims while he lived on his pension, and criticized the state while smugly retaining its respect in the Legion of Honor ribbon he always wore.

iv. Sorel the Ideologue of Violence

Oddly enough, the most famous (or infamous) political theory of Sorel's, that of the necessity of violence, and the distinction between force and violence, has been ignored more than any other of his doctrines. Most historians tend to shy away from it, or to avoid it as far as possible. Yet usually when brief references are made to Sorel, in survey histories, or in relationship to other men, for example, it is this creed of violence for which he is remembered. Thus he was a "pessimist moaning for blood,"⁸⁰ "grist to the Fascist mill,"⁸¹ and "that highly undependable philosopher of violence."⁸² For the Fabian historian, G.D.H. Cole, Sorel was a man who took the love of violence to an extreme, to the level of mutual extermination, in order to develop heroic virtues for no reason whatsoever.⁸³

A defence of the theory of violence is rare. However, Neil McInnes concluded that "myth and violence are not peripheral to our society: they are central phenomena, and likely to endure as far into the future as we can see. Sorel was the first to look this fact in the face."⁸⁴ McInnes defended Sorel because, although in many respects he had anticipated Nazism and totalitarian democracy, he did not support all forms of violence. Since violence exists in all societies, Sorel's defence of violence is as relevant today as it was in his own times. Sorel's philosophical system is not important but his notions of

myth and violence are, especially as "there is not a line in his work to condone systematic violence or violence applied otherwise than by a progressive morality of liberty."⁸⁵

v. Sorel the Unclassifiable

The final broad category in which Sorel will be considered is that dealing with his influence on his contemporaries, and his position either as an eccentric, isolated critic, or as a genuine, if somewhat unique, representative of his own times. A great many historians have preferred to treat Sorel in this manner, and not as a man possessing a certain ideology or peculiarly distinct concept. Among the men who knew him personally there was no more unity of conclusion regarding his contradictory nature and his place in European intellectual history than there would be in later decades. Often the only common consensus concerned his ability to make other men think, to shake their preconceived opinions.

When Sorel died in 1922, the majority of the obituary notices classed him as a contradictory, elusive figure. To some, he was one of the continuing line of original, eccentric and contradictory political and moralist thinkers, "une des physionomies les plus curieuses de ce temps,"⁸⁶ an amateur sociologist who became an ardent revolutionary syndicalist and Bolshevik. In the books or memoirs of his contemporaries this discerning thinker

was one of "les grands agitateurs de la foule humaine,"⁸⁷ a man whose doctrines formed the central meeting point of Marx and Nietzsche. "Il y a chez ce maître à la fois profond et décousu, génial et incomplet, des 'théories secondes' qui ne sont ni les moins riches en découvertes intellectuelles ni les moins révélatrices de sa saisissante originalité."⁸⁸ Even those who were personally hostile to Sorel, and who disliked his lack of constancy, his influence on Mussolini, or his lack of patriotism, possessed the typically ambivalent attitude of many of Sorel's critics. Sorel might be a "petit bourgeois exaspéré," "bavard comme une pie, méchant comme un singe, savant comme un bénédictin," yet he was still a "prodigieuse excitateur de pensée,"⁸⁹ from whose contradictory and diverse work escaped the rays of genius. In the 1920's, Wyndham Lewis, another eccentric, thought that Sorel, "a highly unstable and equivocal figure," who seemed "composed of a crowd of warring personalities,"⁹⁰ was the key to all contemporary political thought.

For Mario Missiroli, Sorel was "le dernier grand écrivain de la France contemporaine,"⁹¹ while according to Charles Maurras, "Georges Sorel appartient par sa grande curiosité des êtres et des choses à cette race d'esprits critiques dont la préoccupation principale se porte sur les efforts de l'histoire plutôt que sur les résultats, sur les itinéraires plutôt que sur les points d'arrivée."⁹²

Stuart Hughes also stressed Sorel's inconsistencies. He regarded Sorel as a man possessed of a great "central ambivalence,"⁹³ a "baffling accumulation of paradoxes and contradictions,"⁹⁴ who was possessed by nature of an "irrespressible disputatiousness,"⁹⁵ and had influential and repellent traits that were "irrational, quixotic and hateful."⁹⁶ Yet Hughes placed him amongst the greatest social thinkers of the twentieth century, with Pareto, Mosca, Croce, Weber, Freud and Bergson, since his mind was "a windy crossroads by which there blew nearly every new social doctrine of the twentieth century."⁹⁷

Despite the increased interest in Sorel in the 1960's and the 1970's, Sorel's philosophy still has not been completely examined in any great depth. Usually only his political views are studied, although these rested on the conclusions that he had drawn from history, art, religion, archaeology, ethnics, law, morality, psychology and philosophy. Many commentators reacted emotionally to Sorel, especially because of his links with fascism, which has led to the neglect of any study on his influence in France. Serious treatments of his two major theories, those of violence and the myth, are still few and far between, as are those on the relationship between Sorel and his contemporaries. The most apparent trend in the historiography of Sorel is the increased respect that he has received from critics in the past decade.

The next chapter will examine Sorel's theory of knowledge, in order to demonstrate his mistrust of a precise world view. He was a pessimist, regarding an optimistic view of man as not only undesirable, but dangerous as well. His view of consciousness, of the individual and society, was strongly opposed to previous rational and liberal ideas. In many ways he was a religious thinker who did not possess a religious faith. But if Sorel was opposed to the traditional philosophy of man and knowledge, he was also aware that his own philosophy demanded a new language with which to communicate the concepts of the second, unknown, mysterious area of life.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

¹Charles Péguy, (1873-1914), the influential Catholic poet and editor, had established the Cahiers de la quinzaine in 1900, and it was largely at Péguy's bookshop that Sorel became acquainted with the literary circle to which he was linked. The quarrel resulted partly from the revival of French religious and nationalist feeling around 1912.

²James Burnham, The Machiavellians, Defenders of Freedom (New York: John Day Co., 1943).

³Robert Louzon, introduction to Lettres à Paul Delesalle, 1914-1921, by Georges Sorel (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1947), p.71.

⁴Isaiah Berlin, "Georges Sorel," The Times Literary Supplement, LXX (1970), p.1617.

⁵James H. Meisel, "Georges Sorel's Last Myth," The Journal of Politics, XII (1950), p.52.

⁶Pierre Andreu, Notre Maître M. Sorel (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1953), p.15.

⁷H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society: The Reconstruction of European Social Thought, 1890-1930 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1958), p.19.

⁸Sorel has not yet received the attention of any biographer, outside the partial biography of Pierre Andreu.

⁹T. E. Hulme, translated Sorel's Reflexions sur la violence into English. One of the major arguments of this paper is that Sorel and Hulme shared many of the same concepts, particularly with regard to their philosophies of language.

¹⁰Like Georges Sorel, Georges Valois was difficult to classify politically. One of the young disciples of Sorel, he became an influential member of the Action Française. In the 1920's he organized a Fascist party, the Blueshirts, which included many former supporters of Sorel. By the 1930's he was turning from Fascism, and during the war he became a member of the Resistance, dying in Bergen-Belsen.

¹¹Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963), p.14.

¹²Jules Monnerot, Inquisitions (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1974), p.45.

¹³Gustave Le Bon, French sociologist and author of Psychologie des Foules (1896).

¹⁴Avriel Goldberger, Visions of a New Hero (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1965).

¹⁵Gaudeno Megaro, Mussolini in the Making (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1938), p.231.

¹⁶Daniel Halévy, the French historian and one of Sorel's closest friends, reported this story in the preface to Andreu's biography (p.19). It was told to him by the director of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Rolland Marcel, who reported that he had been approached by the two governments.

¹⁷Georges Michael, "Qu'est-ce que fut le Sorélisme," Clarté, (Janvier 1, 1925).

¹⁸Robert Goetz-Girey, La Pensée Syndicale Française: Militants et Théoriciens (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1948).

¹⁹John M. Cammett, Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p.125, as quoted by Gramsci in L'Ordine nuovo.

²⁰Ibid., p.254.

²¹Vernon Lee (Violet Page), "M. Sorel and the 'Syndicalist Myth'," The Fortnightly Review, XCVI (October, 1911), p.664.

²²Ibid., p.670.

²³Alexander Gray, The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin (London: Longmans, 1963), p.411.

²⁴Ibid., p.432.

²⁵As quoted in E. H. Carr, Studies in Revolution (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1950), p.162.

²⁶Bertrand Russell, Proposed Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, n.d.).

²⁷Sammy Beracha, La Marxisme Après Marx (Paris: Marcel Riviere, 1937), p.178.

²⁸Ibid., p.196.

²⁹Benedetto Croce, Historical Materialism and the Economics of Karl Marx (London: Howard Latimer Ltd., n.d.), p.119.

³⁰Jacques Barzun, Darwin, Marx, Wagner (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1958).

³¹Croce, p.119.

³²Sorel's criticism of Marxism has often been linked with that of Eduard Bernstein in Germany, but Sorel was never a Marxist to the same degree as Bernstein.

³³Jacques Rennes, Georges Sorel et Le Syndicalisme Révolutionnaire (Paris: Editions Liberté, 1936), p.8.

³⁴James Joll, The Anarchists (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), p.212.

³⁵Georges Valois, D'Un Siècle à l'Autre (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1931), p.131.

³⁶See note 10.

³⁷Valois, quoted in Jack Roth, "Revolution and Morale in Modern French Thought: Sorel and the Sorelians," French Historical Studies III Fall 1963), p.216.

³⁸Valois, p.136.

³⁹Max Nomad, Rebels and Renegades (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1932), p.271.

⁴⁰Francis W. Coker, Recent Political Thought (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934), p.485.

⁴¹George H. Sabine, A History of Political Theory (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p.893.

⁴²Ibid., p.894.

⁴³Franz Borkenau, "Sorel, Pareto, Spengler: Three Fascist Philosophers," Horizon, V, 30 (June, 1942), p.427.

⁴⁴Ibid., p.431.

⁴⁵J. L. Talmon, "The Legacy of Georges Sorel: Marxism, Violence, Fascism," Encounter, XXXIV, 2 (February 1970), p.58.

⁴⁶Jean Deroo, Le Renversement du Matérialisme Historique (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1939), p.36.

⁴⁷Irving Horowitz, Radicalism and the Revolt against Reason, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p.3.

⁴⁸Ibid., p.189.

⁴⁹Ibid., p.162.

⁵⁰Ibid., p.174.

⁵¹Robert A. Nye, "Two Paths to a Psychology of Social Action: Gustave Le Bon and Georges Sorel," Journal of Modern History, XLV (September 3, 1973), p.411.

⁵²Ibid., p.437.

⁵³Monnerot, p.18.

⁵⁴Burnham, p.131.

⁵⁵Neal Wood, "Some Reflections on Sorel and Machiavelli," Political Science Quarterly, LXXXIII (March 1968), p.85.

⁵⁶Ibid., p.91.

⁵⁷John Bowle, Politics and Opinion in the Nineteenth Century (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), p.413.

⁵⁸Leszek Kolakowski, "Georges Sorel: Jansenist Marxist," Dissent, (Winter 1975), p.81.

⁵⁹Patrick Hutton, "Vico's Theory of History and the French Revolutionary Tradition," Journal of the History of Ideas, XXXVII (1976), p.241.

⁶⁰Richard Vernon, "Rationalism and Commitment in Sorel," Journal of the History of Ideas, XXXIV (1973), p.420.

⁶¹Arthur D. Lewis, Syndicalism and the General Strike: An Explanation (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912).

⁶²Geneviève Bianquis, Nietzsche en France: L'Influence de Nietzsche sur la Pensée Française (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1929).

⁶³James Jay Hamilton, "Georges Sorel and the Inconsistencies of a Bergsonian Marxism," Political Theory, I (August 1973), p.329.

⁶⁴Benedetto Croce, "La Pensée de Georges Sorel," Fédération 10 (96), (Janvier 1953), p.24.

⁶⁵Ibid., footnote 9, p.26.

⁶⁶Ibid., p.26.

⁶⁷Ernest Dimnet, "A French Defense of Violence," The Forum, XL (November 1909), p.418.

⁶⁸Ibid., p.422.

⁶⁹Gaétan Pirou, Georges Sorel (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1927), p.11.

⁷⁰Freund, quoted in Georges Goriely, Le Pluralisme Dramatique de Georges Sorel (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1962), p.74.

⁷¹Roger Soltau, French Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century (London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1931), p.436.

⁷²André Rousseaux, Littérature du XX Siècle (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1953), p.38.

⁷³Ibid., p.42.

⁷⁴Richard Humphrey, Georges Sorel: Prophet Without Honor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), p.111.

⁷⁵Ibid., p.112.

⁷⁶Ibid., p.1.

⁷⁷Ibid., p.14.

⁷⁸Scott Lytle, "Georges Sorel: Apostle of Fanaticism," Modern France, editor Edward Mead Earle, (New York: Princeton University Press, 1951), p.265.

⁷⁹Ibid., p.270.

⁸⁰G.D.H. Cole, A History of Socialist Thought, III, 1 and 2, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1956), p.387.

⁸¹Ibid., p.387.

⁸²Ibid., p.356.

⁸³Ibid., p.383.

⁸⁴Neil McInnes, "Georges Sorel," New Society, VIII (December 1966), p.867.

⁸⁵Ibid., p.869.

⁸⁶Raoul Narsy, "Georges Sorel," Journal des Débats, (Septembre 1, 1922).

⁸⁷Maurice Reclus, "Doctrines et influence de Georges Sorel," Les Nouvelles Littéraires, (Novembre 10, 1928).

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Emile Buré, "Souvenirs sur Georges Sorel," Les Nouvelles Littéraires, (Octobre 31, 1947).

⁹⁰Wyndham Lewis, The Art of Being Ruled (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1972), p.128.

⁹¹Mario Missiroli, quoted in Max Ascoli, Georges Sorel (Paris: Librairie Paul Delesalle, 1921), p.13.

⁹²Quoted in Andreu, p.15.

⁹³Hughes, p.91.

⁹⁴Ibid., p.162.

⁹⁵Ibid., p.168.

⁹⁶Ibid., p.178, quote from Edward A. Shils.

⁹⁷Ibid., p.161.

CHAPTER II
SOREL'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE:
NATURE AND MAN

In his historical and political philosophies, Georges Sorel was always deeply preoccupied with the problems of la connaissance. Over and over again in his writing he stated that he was looking for the reasons why men were motivated in certain directions, to perform specific actions, and not others. It is the premise of this thesis that he found this motivation by dividing man and his thought into two worlds, a limited world of rationality and science, which could be explained in conventional language, and an elusive world of irrationality and nature, which required another method of communication. Sorel believed that absolute rules regarding man's knowledge of the exterior world are useless, and that the only certainties that are to be found concern creativity and action.

Sorel's division of the world into two areas of knowledge was linked to the revolution in science that occurred at the turn of the century. The classical system of physics was to break down for two main reasons: because of attacks upon the philosophical and metaphysical basis of

the mechanistic system; and because of an increasing number of revolutionary discoveries which could no longer be explained by the old theories. The leading scientific critics, Pierre Duheim, Wilhelm Ostwald, Ernst Mach, Henri Poincaré, and Karl Pearson first of all attacked the pre-occupation with mechanics, and ultimately the very assumptions upon which the Newtonian world of physics rested. In 1900 Max Planck attacked the nineteenth century principle of continuity, and in 1905, in the "Special Theory of Relativity", the great theoretician, Albert Einstein, was to revolutionize the sacred concepts of time and space. Any eternal absolutes in the eternal world had to be discarded, whether absolutes of time and space, matter or energy. The major revolutions in biology, with the advent of genetics, and in physics emphasized the randomness of nature. Thus certainty in science was declared a delusion, and chance was an integral law. In the twentieth century, philosophy and science moved closer together. In some ways philosophy emulated science when it began to study limited philosophical problems as science studies problems, instead of entire systems.

Unlike many socialists, who continued confidently to link Marxism to science, ignoring the upheaval in that field, Sorel was well aware of the revolution in science, and its consequences, particularly the destruction of certainty. (The circle of intellectuals with whom he was

acquainted included physicists like Jean Perrin and Paul Langevin.)¹ He frequently deplored the division that had arisen between philosophy and science. Indeed, among the irrationalists who stressed the shifting, fluid, mysterious qualities of man and nature, a number of engineers, technicians, and mathematicians figured prominently. Among them was Sorel, as well as men like Pareto and T. E. Hulme.² Whereas Sorel looked to physics, regarding biology as basically unscientific, some of his contemporaries, like Bergson, believed that since evolution had forced philosophy into assuming that progress was a universal law, then "life is a universal stream of becoming in which divisions are illusory and reality can be lived but not reasoned about."³

Sorel divided nature into two realms, "natural" and "artificial". Natural nature described all of nature, the meaningless world of chaos, disaster, flux, and incoherence which man could never control or predict. No laws or hypotheses could be written for this arbitrary, confusing, indeterminate world, for man would never understand it or its relationship to himself. Certainly he would never be able to exert any form of control. Any philosopher who imagined that he was able to write absolute and universal laws for this world was guilty of the sin of "scientism", of falsely applying rational doctrines to that which was utterly irrational, or of generalizing from the specific to the universal. Man must abandon "all hopes of discovering

a complete science of nature."⁴ "Scientism" was one of the sins of the Encyclopedists, and of the modern intellectuals, like Spencer and Haeckel. They glibly devised cosmological hypotheses to explain the world, and then went on to form similar theories about the world of men. They disliked specialization, control or painstaking discipline.⁵ For Sorel, the only manner in which man could understand this senseless world of mystery was not through immutable laws but through images and metaphors, and even these were of limited value.

This world of waste and hazard was separated by an unbridgeable chasm from the world of artificial nature where science and technology could logically exist. A man-made world, it included a doctrine of progress, of scientific predictability, and of rational laws. It was artificial because man created it through machines, in order that he might have a small bulwark of stability and freedom against the malevolent, hostile forces of nature. Freedom existed only in this world. The machines that man invented were models of forces in nature, but being models, and not abstract laws, were of limited validity. As man's knowledge of machines increased, so, too, did his knowledge, which was always based on precise, not abstract principles, on statistics and provable facts. Artificial nature was continually changing and adapting as man's understanding of machines was transformed. Only in this sphere could

scientific knowledge exist. This distinction of Sorel's between natural and artificial nature was strongly influenced by the similar conclusions of Vico, that men could know geometry and arithmetic in an absolute sense, because those were the work of their intelligence, but not nature, which was the work of God. Vico had denied "*à l'homme la possibilité de posséder la science de ce qu'il n'a pas fait.*"⁶

The artificial world was created and maintained by technology which was the basis of every historical doctrine, whether economical, political, philosophical or social. Without technology man could have neither a limited understanding of nature, nor of himself. Man was totally homo faber, and his cognition was derived from his own creativity. In other words, technology was a method of comprehending the world, a form of language. With his "respect for precision and clarity"⁷ Sorel severely limited the areas of absolute knowledge, discarding abstract scientific principles and generalizations, in favour of probabilities and concepts which could be proven on a factual basis. A key element in Sorel's epistemology was this distinction between optimistic generalities or "scientism", and pessimistic technology. (Hulme also strongly disliked scientific determinism which he viewed as a mental strait jacket.)

Sorel's emphasis upon technology may have been

partly derived from his engineering background, his proletarian sympathies, or through the influence of Marx, but in his heavy emphasis upon technology he went much further than his Marxist and socialist contemporaries. As Robert Louzon pointed out, Sorel had pushed Marx's historical materialism to an extreme with his revolutionary and social philosophy of "l'ouvrierisme",⁸ the belief that man's method of knowledge is tied to his mode of production.

This fundamental assertion of Sorel's, that technology is of vital importance, has been ignored by many historians who have portrayed him rather as a breaker of machinery, a man looking to the past. This misreading of Sorel may be due to the fact that amongst the irrationalist thinkers there was often an undercurrent of doom, a feeling that the new industrialized world would destroy civilization, such as is found in the novels of D. H. Lawrence.

For Sorel, technology was the basis for much of his philosophical constructions.⁹ He believed that in order to comprehend another civilization, the historian must examine the underlying technology or the artificial nature of that era. In this manner the historian could decipher the principles upon which that civilization was built, for social, ethical, and political doctrines were the superstructures of the machine and technology.

Man could not foretell the future of society, because he could not predict new inventions, upon which

society would be based. This was another leading principle of Sorel's, that it is impossible to read the future, since no man knew the social mechanisms that would exist in a few years, especially considering how difficult it was even to reason clearly and rationally about the present. Man must limit his ambitions, and be content to study those indicators, such as technology, which would show him how to "construire des mobiles pour sa conduite, et de les construire librement."¹⁰

Sorel placed a particular emphasis upon the value of productive work, believing that those societies in which the leading citizens no longer participated in production were especially demoralized and decadent. ". . . dans les classes sociales qui ne travaillent pas . . . la démoralisation est extrême. Il en a été ainsi dans tous les siècles, et c'est là une loi de la nature humaine."¹¹

This emphasis upon the spiritual necessity of work was not peculiar to Sorel, as it was very common in philosophical and social thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, being followed by men as diverse as John Ruskin, Pierre Joseph Proudhon, and Theodor Herzl.

Therefore, Sorel's criticism of the bourgeois world was not due just to the corrupt, paralysed will of the Third Republic with its continual crises such as Boulangism or Panama, but because democracy was based on a false premise, just as the world of the Greeks had been.

No civilization could survive if the political and economic elite were consumers living off a producing slave or proletarian class beneath them. Bourgeois society was a society of merchants and consumers, not a productive society at all. The future lay with the proletariat, the producers, the class with the closest bond to technology who knew how to make the machine the servant of man. The ideal organization of the proletariat was through the syndicate, which was to dispense with any overseers. In the workshop, new and greater technology would be created through the collective efforts of the workers. Not only did this emphasize the more traditional values of discipline, persistence, and hard work, it also tied man to a community upon which was based his social values and laws. The proletariat must use the period of capitalism to train themselves, through a long evolution, at the end of which they would be "producteurs supérieurs"¹² who loved their work, regarded it as art, and understood intelligently everything that occurred in the workshop. "Il faut les rendre à la fois consciencieux, artistes et savants, dans tout ce qui regarde la production."¹³

Since man can never control or know the chaotic world of natural nature but only the artificial world of his creation, and since this world is moved through chance and hazard as much as by any other force, then man must resign himself to historical periods of decadence, decline,

and mediocrity. "Decadence" is another highly significant key to Sorel's philosophy of knowledge. Indeed, the fear of decadence was one of the central preoccupations of the irrationalists, of men like Nietzsche, Spengler, and Max Stirner.¹⁴ This "malaise" (as some critics termed it) which often emphasized destruction, chaos, cruelty, extremity, and death, was opposed to civilization, organization, and moderation. It regarded with abhorrence the bourgeois support of rationalism and democracy, and saw only man's cruelty and indifference.¹⁵ In later generations it formed part of the existentialist philosophy, and the isolation of the individual, with the restriction of choice, prevalence of determinism, influence of the impersonal, lack of human responsibility, and loss of values.¹⁶

The fear of decadence took many forms, but most of those who believed in the existence of the irrational agreed totally with T. S. Eliot that "our own period is one of decline,"¹⁷ and with Emile Faguet who wrote of the lack of remedies to "this modern disease, the worship of intellectual and moral incompetence."¹⁸ Lasserre wrote that Sorel was very conscious of "un mal p sant sur notre condition comme un esclavage."¹⁹ Closer to Sorel, the monarchist novelist and playwright Paul Bourget had a resounding theatrical success in 1910 with La Barricade, based upon a chapter in Reflections on Violence dealing with bourgeois decadence.

At no point in his work did Sorel ever give a clear and succinct definition of decadence, yet he was continually haunted by it. By decadence, Sorel meant not only that a society had lost the more humble virtues, such as chastity and hard work, but also that it had become mediocre, without any distinguishing characteristics. There were no outbursts of heroism, of grandeur, of creativity, of conflict. The cult of success dominated. Politics and economics were in total disarray, the military was weak and impotent, society had become bland, and classes and groups were indistinguishable one from the other. When conflict disappeared, then politics, economics, law and society would all disintegrate. Tradition was no longer regarded with respect, and creativity was still-born. As in ancient Athens, the citizens were no longer interested in permanent values like art, but only in securing a peaceful and agreeable life. Decadence was the law of ideologies, for ideologies sowed everywhere the seeds of desperation and death. Jules Monnerot, in a luminous commentary on Sorel's theory of the myth, concluded that, for Sorel, "la *décadence* est l'état où une culture perd ses caractéristiques différentielles, ne correspond plus aux normes qui servent à la définir, la limite de l'évolution étant la perte totale de l'identité."²⁰ The decadents were those who were resigned to this loss of identity.

Decadence could never be stopped permanently since

the natural world of chaos and brutality was always pressing upon man's artificial world. If man relaxed his vigilance for any moment, then his society would lose its meaning and start to decay. Man could make only temporary stops in this decay when his action created a period of liberation. A middle ground of compromise and moderation was impossible, and indeed, was one of the symptoms of decline.

The optimists had never understood the difficulties of altering the character of individual men, and also groups of men. This extreme dislike of those who believed in easy solutions was a never-ceasing motif in Sorel's work. Even in 1921, he was still repeating that "je reste plus persuadé que jamais que l'optimisme en matière de politique est à la base des malheurs du monde, parce qu'il est basé sur l'espérance de choses irréalisables que l'on veut faire croire possibles aux masses, pour mieux les mener par le bout du nez."²¹ It was important to realize that "on ne peut remuer les masses en leur vantant le bon ordre, l'harmonie, la rationalité des choses existantes."²²

For Sorel, as for T. E. Hulme, pessimism was not a negative but a positive attitude, since at least it contained the possibility of change (unlike the pessimistic individualism of the romantics, for example). The true pessimist had few illusions about man, realizing that he was a frail, limited, feeble creature whose natural weakness was as nothing when weighed against the brute

shambles of nature. Because "notre nature cherchant toujours à s'échapper vers la décadence,"²³ the movement towards decadence and barbarism was natural, but the opposite movement towards greatness was very difficult. Those who considered man to have unlimited possibilities were not facing up to reality.

Once the essential weakness of man was recognized the pessimist could begin to develop his will-to-deliverance (another key phrase for Sorel), the great creative act of history, which optimism could never achieve. In studying motivation and social movement in history, Sorel believed that the historian must look at the way in which thought is dominated "by the conception of the path to deliverance," accompanied by a "warlike excitement."²⁴ The optimist will never move at all since he believes that in this best-of-all possible worlds, perfection will ultimately be reached, or else, having failed, he will become embittered and dangerous. All determinisms, like optimism or positivism, do not recognize the strength of the forces weighing on man, and his intrinsic limitations, and therefore do not discern the need for a conscious effort. One reason Sorel was attracted to syndicalism was because it was a movement that acknowledged the necessity of struggle, and did not fatalistically accept the strength of the opposition.

Sorel's pessimism was a creative doctrine since he believed wholeheartedly that freedom and a measure of

independence could be achieved primarily through man's construction of machines. Technology was an intrinsic part of the free spirit (and it must be emphasized again that Sorel placed enormous significance on the machine as the basis of man's scientific and rational knowledge). One can only speculate, but it seems very probable that Sorel would have welcomed with great delight the arrival of the computer age, especially as computers led to the formation of another distinct form of creativity and language. The strength of pessimism (and true pessimism was not defeatist in nature) was that it led to this greater creativity, which could help to thwart the inevitable decline into decadence.

With regard to his theory of knowledge, Sorel believed that knowledge of artificial nature was obtained through technology as a form of communication. Knowledge of man and society, on the other hand, was derived neither from the individual nor the masses but through a specific group, and the hero, who embodied the virtues necessary for man's survival. In his conclusions about man and society he was very close in spirit to the anarchist position.

Sorel strongly attacked the cult of the individual and would not have agreed with men like André Malraux who lived out their own personal myths, or with the concept of the Promethean superman. Part of his very strong aversion to intellectuals and to the bourgeoisie was their instinctive sympathy for the individual. This criticism of the over-

emphasis upon the role of the individual is found even in his earliest works, like Le Procès de Socrate and was encouraged by the influence of Vico who also ignored the individual character of men. Apart from certain isolated people, especially artists, the individual did not exist independently for he was both part of the community, such as the family, or the collectivity, like the syndicate. Basically, Sorel's interests lay with the faceless men of Picasso.

Although he was not interested in the solitary individual, apart from a few rare geniuses like Socrates or Lenin, Sorel was not concerned with the masses either, or even with any group as comprehensive and as large as the modern nation state. He disregarded the sentiment that the poor were intrinsically more virtuous than the rich, a sentiment upon which many revolutions in the past had been based. In 1910 he praised Péguy's Jeanne d'Arc as the precursor of a revival in French nationalism, but his interest in this nationalism from 1910 to 1912 was an aberration in the general tenor of his thought, as is shown by his anti-chauvinistic statements during the First World War. Like Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, Emile Faguet, and Robert Michels, Sorel was interested in group behavior. All these men, like Wilfred Trotter and Graham Wallas in England, believed the masses to be easily dominated, passionate, fanatical, irrational, and often cruel. These writers were opposed to equality since "equality is so

contrary to nature that we have no right to torture nature in order to establish real equality among men."²⁵

Sorel was especially opposed to the bourgeoisie as a class because it had ignored the powerful force of tradition. Tradition was one of his absolutes, as it was one of the clearest methods by which man could study the most permanent, inviolate elements of the human spirit. Tradition did not mean ceremony, "the product of magical superstitions."²⁶ For Sorel, what had frequently occurred in the past will occur again in the future. For example, this was why the syndicate was important, since "les principes de l'atelier bien organisé n'ont pas beaucoup varié, depuis les temps les plus anciens" ²⁷ He was particularly fascinated by legal tradition and many times deplored the fact that Marx and other socialists had ignored the study of the legal constructions of historical societies.

Although he did classify himself as a socialist, and attacked the bourgeoisie so vehemently, Sorel did not really see the future, apart from the immediate future, as lying with the proletariat, since his philosophy of man was not based upon a class struggle. However, he did view the proletariat as a group which, at that particular point in history, possessed the possibility of transformation. The future lay with the proletariat, but not the proletariat as an anonymous mass. Rather, upon Marxian doctrines

of socialism, Sorel superimposed his own doctrine of the heroic, vital group, which was to lead society out of decadence.

Sorel was always interested in groups in history, the minorities that changed their own ages through epic struggles. Jules Monnerot has given the name of bund to these groups, that is "un groupe sélectionné . . . qui est intraitable par le milieu, mais, au contraire, le traite."²⁸ A bund is not a party, such as the Bolshevik party of Lenin, for a party was at all times only interested in conquering state power, and using it to the party's advantage. The bund was a state within a state, independent, self-supporting, and possessing a distinct ethos and morality of its own. Sorel did not examine why some men were attracted to membership in a bund, and why some were not, but thought, nevertheless, that many men could not survive on their own without exterior discipline, some of which the family had provided in the past.

The bund was a spontaneous and disciplined group, a new aristocracy, "un groupement des hommes les plus dignes de gouverner,"²⁹ similar to "elite troops, trained by monastic life, ready to brave all obstacles, and filled with an absolute confidence in victory."³⁰ The bund was not an elite composed of men destined by birth, or by power to rule, although it might work in the same fashion as an elite, leading the masses in their struggle. Neither

was it like Nietzsche's moral elite, or like the theories of elites of Mosca and Pareto, even if some of his supporters, such as Georges Valois, would later radically alter the emphasis, turning it into a fascist doctrine of born rulers. The element that distinguished the bund was its heroic willingness to follow a myth which inspired it to action, not its intrinsic qualities. The revolutionary battles in the future will be "collections of heroic exploits accomplished by individuals under the influence of an extraordinary enthusiasm."³¹ In the syndicate, the workers remained individuals, but part of the group.

If the bund was the group, then the individuals were the anonymous heroes who marched in a steady parade through Sorel's work. The hero was the man who through personal choice and will power, and through belief in the particular myth of a certain bund, was able to achieve something of supreme value. The hero, who longed for the moral regeneration of man, and who was utterly devoted to the cause, could realize his own potentiality for greatness. This hero, through the bund, was an active force in momentous historical movements, such as the birth of the early Church. For Maurras, a man was born with "Frenchness," whether he was aware of it, or even desired it--"a non-mystical, non-racial, 'positive' doctrine of nationality."³² But for Sorel, the hero was not born different from other men, but became a hero only through personal choice, or through

the strength of his belief in the myth. In this emphasis upon heroism, Sorel moved away from the Marxian doctrine of historical materialism with its disavowal of any forces but the economic. For Sorel believed that man's will was essential, that he could create his own destiny through psychological and spiritual means.

The bund and the hero also possessed war-like virtues which were absent in the general society. In common with many anarchists and irrationalists, Sorel was opposed in the deepest sense to a life of ease and comfort, praising instead the heroic qualities of self-denial, self-discipline and self-sacrifice.³³ Both the right and the left, from Barrès to Lenin, praised qualities of greatness and heroism, as had Vico, James, Proudhon, and Nietzsche. A culture could find vitality and nobility only through the leadership of individuals and groups who seeking perfection or the sublime, had epic qualities of energy and dignity. Like Mosca, Sorel was "austere and passionate, an ancient stranded in an alien age."³⁴ His heroes were those of Homer, of the Christian martyrs, and of the early capitalists who gave up everything for the cause.³⁵

The values that were important in this life were not secular ones, such as love for one's fellow man or love of a woman. What was essential was faith that recognized the strength of the enemy, of indifference, mediocrity and resignation, and the uncontrollable horror of nature,

yet sought to make life meaningful, to create an interlude, no matter how short, of beauty and grandeur and the sublime. After accepting pessimistically, but realistically, that man was fated to find barbarism and decadence, man could counter this with the hope and faith that through supreme effort and his own conscious will he might briefly control his own destiny. Man must remain passionate and heroic, ready to endure suffering for the cause, which was never just a personal one. Against the powers of nature and the blows of fate, he could offer only his consciousness and the choice of a myth or an idea, reaching for the sublime. Death and destruction were not the answer, but self-sacrifice for the salvation of others was very much part of the mystique.

In a summary of Sorel's philosophy of human nature, the keys are indisputably the search for the sublime by the anonymous hero in the bund. The sublime could not be described exactly in words as it was an emotional concept, best expressed in a poetic sense. The existence of the bund and the hero led to a variety of nuances of belief and action. (Sorel did not compare his heroic groups in detail, only in general outline). Since there was no certainty in life, changes in direction were to be expected continually, and thus the most logical outlook was a pluralistic one.

With regard to his philosophy of knowledge, Sorel divided life into a chaotic, catastrophic world of natural nature, which man could never comprehend or understand,

except in short lived flashes, and an artificial nature understood in precise terms, in a technical form or language. Man himself could not be understood through the individual or the mass, but through the group or bund, and the sublime hero. If philosophy wished to understand the motivations and actions of the bund, it was not possible to use the rational, logical languages of Descartes. Therefore, it was necessary to find another form of communication. According to Sorel, this communication was dependent upon radically different ideas of time and movement.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

¹"Jean Perrin and Paul Langevin, both physicists under thirty in 1899, were members of the Socialist circle . . . at the Socialist bookstore opened by Peguy." See "Science and the French National Strength" by Henry E. Guerlac in Modern France: Problems of the Third and Fourth Republics, Edward Mead Earle, editor, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p.92.

²Pareto had trained as an engineer, and Hulme studied mathematics at Cambridge.

³William Dampier-Whetham, A History of Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p.446.

⁴Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p.149.

⁵Georges Sorel, The Illusions of Progress, translated by John and Charlotte Stanley, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p.22.

⁶Georges Sorel, De l'utilité du Pragmatisme (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1928), p.336. "La distinction que je pose entre la nature artificielle et la nature naturelle dépend évidemment des idées de Vico . . . j'estime que le moment est venu de développer le système de Vico"

⁷Richard Humphrey, Georges Sorel; Prophet without Honor: A Study in Anti-Intellectualism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), p.64.

⁸Louzon, preface to Lettres à Delesalle, p.5.

⁹"Pour connaître l'homme, il est toujours nécessaire de la considerer tout entier, comme travailleur, et de ne jamais le séparer des appareils avec lesquels il gagne sa vie." Georges Sorel, D'Aristote à Marx (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1935), p.96.

¹⁰Georges Sorel, preface to Formes et Essences du Socialisme par Saverio Merlino, (Paris: V. Giard et E. Brière, 1898), p.XII.

¹¹Georges Sorel, Le Procès de Socrate: Examen Critique des Thèses Socratiques (Paris: Germer Baillière et C., 1889), p.85.

¹²Georges Sorel, L'Avenir Socialiste des Syndicates (Paris: Librairie G. Jacques et C., 1901), p.84.

¹³Ibid., p.84.

¹⁴Talmon (p.48) placed Sorel in "the ranks of the great nineteenth century prophets of wrath, with men like de Maistre, Carlyle, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, etc.", saying that Sorel epitomized the pathetic pilgrimage of modern man who had lost the certainty of earlier years.

¹⁵Sorel's theory of the degeneration of society, except under conditions of strife, war, or hostile physical conditions is similar to some of the theories of the Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn on degeneration and the consumer society. Basically the theory seems to operate as if men and society are similar organisms--that if men can find unknown strength or courage in a crisis, so, too, will society.

¹⁶Erich Kahler, The Tower and the Abyss (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957), p.6.

¹⁷T. S. Eliot, Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1948), p.6.

¹⁸Emile Faguet, The Cult of Incompetence (London: John Murray, 1914), p.216.

¹⁹Pierre Lasserre, Georges Sorel: Théoricien de l'impérialisme (Paris: Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine, 1928), p.84.

²⁰Monnerot, p.42.

²¹Propos de Georges Sorel, recueillis par Jean Variot (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Française, 1935), p.65.

²²Procès de Socrate, p.277.

²³Georges Sorel, Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat (New York: Arno Press, 1975), p.138.

²⁴Reflections on Violence, p.37.

²⁵Faguet, p.214.

²⁶The Illusions of Progress, p.107.

²⁷L'Avenir Socialiste des Syndicates, p.77.

²⁸Monnerot, p.10.

²⁹L'Avenir Socialiste des Syndicates, p.76.

³⁰Reflections on Violence, p.271.

³¹Ibid., p.239.

³²D. W. Brogan, French Personalities and Problems (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946), p.65.

³³Avriel Goldberger said that Sorel shared this eulogy of heroic virtues in common with men like André Saurès, Romain Rolland, Charles Péguy, Ernest Psichari, Henri Franch, Barrès, Maurras, Elie Faure, Drieu la Rochelle and Montherland who all wrote on morality and decadence in an atmosphere of impending doom. Johannet said of Sorel, "c'est en effet la préoccupation-la hantise-de l'héroïsme qui informe avec puissance la pensée de M. Georges Sorel. Voilà, le gond et voilà le pôle autour desquels on tourne ses méditations essentielles." René Johannet, Itinéraires d'Intellectuels (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1921), p.93.

³⁴James H. Meisel, The Myth of the Ruling Class: Gaetano Mosca and the "Elite" (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1962), p.13.

³⁵In 1917 Sorel sadly reported to Croce that he saw no signs of an end to decadence since "un . . . résultat ne peut être obtenu que si les peuples acceptent de suivre une voie de pénitence, comme l'avait déclaré Renan en 1871" "Lettere di Georges Sorel a Benedetto Croce," La Critica, (Janvier 20, 1917).

CHAPTER III

TIME AND MOVEMENT

i. The Leap of Faith

Sorel's concept of language was directly linked to his views on time and movement, which were derived in part from his theory of knowledge. Most critics of Sorel lose sight of the property of spontaneity, the scent of the apocalypse in his writing, and try to tie him down to a rigid, inflexible system. But Sorel's world view moved at a radically different temp from that of rationalist thinkers, or even from many of his fellow socialists. No longer was society considered to be moving in an orderly sequential fashion, from cause to effect, from pre-civilization towards civilization. Instead, discontinuity and abrupt contrasts were emphasized. The notion that each era had direct lineal ancestors was rejected. In place of lineal "progress", the mind and society were thought to make rapid jumps, in what may be termed "leaps of faith" or the "heroic leap."¹ Bergson's philosophy proceeded in this manner, and so, too, did Sorel's. Since democracy must work through compromise, toleration, and accommodation, Sorel rejected this form of government as it was not a reflection of reality. Rather,

history moved because of sudden, abrupt changes, and because of strife between groups, although these changes were preceded by a long period of preparation and education.

Sorel was an historian by inclination and by faith, and it was through his historical studies that he first discovered the "leap of faith", particularly through his readings of the Italian historian, Giambattista Vico.² Sorel never developed a unified, logical historical system, as did Spengler or Vico, for there was always a possibility at any moment, that through will power and struggle, mankind could make a sudden leap in a totally new direction. Societies did not proceed through the slow development of political groups, organizations, and institutions but by jumping at an unexpected tangent. Sorel's belief in a leap of faith was supported by his conditional approval of syndicalism. When syndicalism proved not to have the momentum to make this leap, Sorel abandoned the movement, but not the proletariat, to whom he always remained loyal. One reason why he was antagonistic throughout his life to the French Revolution was that the revolutionary tradition supported a linear instead of a cyclical interpretation of history.

Although Sorel rejected Vico's belief that historical truth was an absolute, that there existed a large, overall design at the end of which man will know God, he accepted Vico's theory of ricorso. Vico's theory of history answered the need for constant renewal and for

perpetual creative tension. Ricorsi were entirely spontaneous. Vico had a cyclical, not a linear view of history (although it was possible for one cycle to be more advanced than another). Very simply, Vico said that all nations followed the same basic pattern, moving in three stages from primitivism to civilization, from monarchy to commonwealth to civil monarchy. In the last stage the citizens grew more and more selfish, society became unstable, and eventually it lapsed back into barbarism. Sorel did not believe that societies always followed this pattern, since the appearance of heroism and of a social myth might halt the decline into decadence. However, in this theory of Vico's he had an historical model which could be adjusted to explain the leap of faith, or the will-to-deliverance. ". . . toujours l'esprit passe de l'instinctif à l'intellectuel, de l'empirisme à la connaissance raisonnée, de la passion au droit; et au bout d'un certain temps il y a recommencement par régénération des états psychologiques primitifs."³

Certain conditions were necessary before the ricorso could occur. "Ils ont lieu quand l'âme populaire revient à des états primitifs, que tout est instinctif, créateur et poétique dans la société."⁴ During the period when he was involved with syndicalism Sorel believed that he saw the right conditions present in socialism because in the class struggle was a power superior to all others.

Only a revolution would bring about a ricorso, but after the revolution the proletariat would find not only economic and political changes, but also new moral values. For Sorel the most useful example of a ricorso was primitive Christianity, which began also in decadence. "Les débuts du christianisme seraient incompréhensibles si l'on ne supposait chez des disciples enthousiastes, un état tout à fait analogue à celui des civilisations archaïques; le socialisme ne peut prétendre renouveler le monde s'il ne se forme pas de la même manière."⁵ The extreme changes in Sorel's political positions are believable if his faith in the ricorso is remembered. Apart from his short-lived alliance with the right, however, Sorel always sought a ricorso on the left.

The best example of Sorel's faith in the apocalyptic, instantaneous leap of faith was his belief in revolution, which he emphasized particularly in his works relating to socialism. He always tried to relate political thought to action, and to maintain the revolutionary spirit. Violence is always associated with the leap of faith, although violence does not necessarily imply blood, but merely a sharp break with the past. Nevertheless, to make the leap man needs a great deal of courage since he is jumping into the dark unknown.

Sorel proceeded by jumps in his sociological theory as well. There was no attempt made to combine all problems facing contemporary society into one question or

one solution, or to place under one concept a total historical period. He believed that like history, social realities could not be understood in a linear manner or as a whole unit. Life is fluid and varied, so the only method of understanding it is by extracting and studying precise units or segments, which are then isolated from everything else, unlike the scientific methods which related the function of an organism to the whole. Sorel gave the name "diremptions" to this method, which, according to Edward Shils, may be a word that Sorel coined himself.⁶ Sorel said that his method was not new and had long been understood by philosophers but its significance had often been misunderstood.

La philosophie sociale est obligée, pour suivre les phénomènes les plus considérables de l'histoire de procéder à une "diremption", d'examiner certaines parties sans tenir compte de tous les liens qui les rattachent à l'ensemble, de déterminer, en quelque sorte, le genre de leur activité en les poussant vers l'indépendance. Quand elle est arrivée ainsi à la connaissance la plus parfaite, elle ne peut plus essayer de reconstituer l'unité rompue.⁷

•• The significance of diremptions was that they recognized the lack of unity in the world. Diremptions could be one individual, a series of events, or a situation, but they were no longer connected to the whole. This method offered a new method of apprehending reality, through symbolism, and through an appreciation of historical motives which were beyond the range of intelligence. The diremption "fournit moins des représentations que des symboles, dont participent les phénomènes, tantôt d'une

manière assez évidente, tantôt d'une manière éloignée, complexe et impossible à définir."⁸ Although diremptions were a useful model for viewing reality they should not be applied out of context. If they were applied elsewhere they made no sense, becoming vague and elusive.⁹ Diremptions were "arbitrary abstractions from reality--only approximately what Max Weber was to call 'ideal types' or what subsequent social scientists called 'models'."¹⁰

With regard to his methods of thought, Sorel's mind cannot be understood without some reference to the leap of faith which was vital to the comprehension of man and his world. Civilizations had moved in the past, and would move in the future, through ricorso and through revolution. Philosophers could not draw universal conclusions from a study of history, but they could have flashes of understanding by extracting and examining diremptions. Since nature was not unified but broken, men must jump over the gaps, recognizing both the continuity and the discontinuity of reality. Sometimes Sorel despaired about making others understand this fact: "combien de gens seront capables de voir que ces variations tiennent à la complexité des problèmes qui ont été abordés à des points de vue divers, en raison des circonstances de notre histoire contemporaine."¹¹ Julien Benda, in his indictment of the intellectuals who were his contemporaries, rightly accused men like Sorel of only looking at things in time, a becoming, and never as a

state of permanence beyond time. These leaps of faith would be found in a variety of mediums such as poetry, with its new, discontinuous, contrasting character. It was partly because of the leap of faith that Sorel was opposed to the idea of progress, which assumed that the now, this moment in time, is not valuable in itself, but has only a secondary, provisional value compared to the future. Hulme, also, attacked the idea of continuity, attaching far more importance, as poets like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot would do, to jumps and contrasts in thought and style. According to Hulme, the emphasis upon continuity had caused men to ignore the existence of discontinuity which was also part of reality. "This shrinking from a gap or jump in nature has paralyzed our objective perception."¹² Men must attempt once again to see the gap.

From this doctrine of the leap of faith naturally flows Sorel's emphasis upon movement, particularly in the forms of action and struggle, violence and force. Both Hulme and Sorel attempted to destroy the idea that the world has unity, and that the monistic world can be described and analyzed clearly and calmly, especially in words. Sorel believed that action would be eternally necessary since it is only through conflict that the moral and heroic values that man needs to destroy decadence are strengthened or revived. The need for action and struggle was an absolute law of history because as Pascal had pointed out, to rest was to die.

Here, again, Sorel was part of a distinct climate of opinion. Nietzsche had preached the necessity of action, as did Shaw with his Life Force, and Bergson with the élan vital and his vitalist philosophy. T. S. Eliot believed that conflicts, jealousies, and friction between groups, classes, regions, and individuals were all necessary. Anarchists in this era had also emphasized action, with order and planning of lesser importance. Robert Michels acknowledged the strength of power struggles while for Freud, each individual had a continuous struggle between the different levels of his consciousness. Many Marxists and even some men on the right displayed great confidence in the effective power of action and the possibility of change. Hulme, too, in his "Critique of Satisfaction" said that "if every action is solely a means to an end, then all value vanishes from the action itself."¹³

Both Bergson and James had particularly influenced Sorel with regard to his philosophy of action. Sorel followed Bergson with great attention from Bergson's first appearance in 1889 with Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience. Bergson not only gave him a number of ideas and images which he used in social and economic questions, but also strengthened his anti-rational tendencies. Certainly the doctrine of pragmatism aided Sorel in the elucidation of his own doctrine of action, although the influence of pragmatism can be over emphasized. Sorel was

skeptical of pragmatism when he first encountered it, believing that it would disguise the religious aspects of life, although he was firmly pragmatic after the war. However, in general, he held similar conclusions to those given in the definition of pragmatism at a meeting which he attended in 1908. "Le pragmatisme se présente avant tout comme une philosophie anti-intellectualiste où la connaissance pure est subordonnée à l'action."¹⁴

Whatever the source of his faith in movement, Sorel held that all doctrines have value only insofar as they inspire creativity and results (although it was still necessary to study ideas as well). This was one reason why he condemned Socrates, who studied the Absolute without involving action. Like Marx and Vico, he believed that men make their own history, through a reconciliation of ideas (which he was later to re-name myths) and action. "L'histoire nous apprend que l'héritage des maîtres ne saurait être longtemps conservé sans des efforts quasi héroïques de volonté,"¹⁵ since man was opposed on all sides by "le mal". Action had a mysticism of its own, a glorification of the spirit of conquest. Even science, instead of remaining aloof and disinterested, must become part of everyday life. Action and struggle are creative because they represent the unconscious, not abstract intelligence. The great emphasis on action came partly from Proudhon, who also believed that the just and good society is possible only through action.¹⁶

The enemy for Sorel was the status quo, and the belief that moderation and compromise could solve all problems. Sorel opposed all sentiments of indifference, inactivity, tranquility, and routine, just as Proudhon did.

Historically Sorel admired those eras when men had had to struggle for survival, either physically, morally, or spiritually. For example, in ancient Greece the city states had fought each other, and as a result the citizens were hardy, strong, and virtuous. In comparison, the state-supported bourgeoisie of modern France were "envieuse, ignorante et gourmande",¹⁷ the detractors, not the supporters of society. He did not agree with thinkers like Aristotle¹⁸ who believed that the desire for conflict would eventually disappear as men grew more civilized and more able to conquer their bloody and warlike qualities: or with the rational thinkers of the nineteenth century. Machiavelli had asserted that conflict would always be part of a civilized state, and that a method must be found to resolve it without political and social upheaval, whereas Sorel believed that not only was such a resolution nearly impossible, it was also highly undesirable. He partly became involved in the battles of socialism, syndicalism, and nationalism because they over-emphasized the necessity for struggle.

From the concept of ricorso, and that of action, naturally follows Sorel's famous endorsement of the more

specific theory of violence and force. This doctrine was not clearly expressed in his earliest works, although he had an instinctive sympathy for it; but once it appeared, it was never forgotten. The idea of violence, like that of action, was common to this generation, and was to become one of the distinguishing characteristics of the twentieth century. Marx, Pareto, Mosca and Gumplowicz all believed in conflict (and Sorel was familiar with their work). In 1921, during a discussion concerning his influence on Lenin and Mussolini, Sorel denied that ideas were due to individuals. Indeed, his doctrine of violence had simply recognized the "incontestable malaise moral et social" existing in society and that like Lenin he himself "veut mener les choses jusqu'au bout."¹⁹ Mussolini, too, had simply absorbed something that was already in the air. One reason violence was so appealing was that it was so abhorrent to the middle classes, and especially to the intellectual establishment, a group for whom Sorel had had a strong distaste since the Dreyfus Affair. Not only was the purity and nobility of violence stressed in this era by men like Sorel and Maurras, but violence was also common in society, being especially prevalent amongst the proletariat, through the use of such means of direct action as the strike, boycott, sabotage, and mass demonstrations.

The Sorelian doctrine of violence differed markedly from the socialist support of violence. The left

believed that violence was necessary because the proletariat had been infiltrated, absorbing bourgeois doctrines. Violence was a useful method of separating the workers from existing middle class values, especially when more gentle means such as argument were ineffective. The Revolution, with its transitional character, would set them free, after which violence would virtually disappear. Sorel, on the other hand, did not regard violence as having only this one role, since it reoccurred time and again in history, as a means of promoting heroism, and halting decadence. Even if a perfect society were attained, it would eventually decline and then violence would again become necessary. Violence was not merely a tactical means, but a demonstration of conviction and certainty. However, it would be erroneous to believe that Sorel supported violence purely for its own sake, since violence was based on morality, and allied with an ideal.

Despite the criticisms of Sorel's dichotomic division of force and violence, Sorel's emphasis on violence had a considerable influence, whether consciously or unconsciously, on later generations, such as Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre. His combination of the proletarian class struggle with Bergsonian doctrines has been compared to Sartre's amalgamation of existentialism and Marxism.²⁰ When Sorel spoke of violence, he meant more than the word usually meant; not simply physical force, but an entire

attitude towards life, a form of psychological symbolism. For Sorel, violence was the best means of maintaining and protecting man's creativity and of creating new thoughts and emotions. He conceived it partly in the mould of the heroism of the ancient Greek warrior, where in the horrors of battle man discovers his best qualities, the soul's sublime nature.²¹ The military or warrior class was the social personification of the "instinct" in man. The goal of violence is not simply a short-term change, or the political seizure of power, but radical alterations in society, economics, politics, and ethics. "We know the war that the proletariat should conduct against its master is suited to developing in it noble sentiments that are today completely lacking in the bourgeoisie."²² Violence was not evil per se, and indeed, the absence of violence, which often meant the absence of the heroic and the sublime, was often more evil. The emphasis is more on moral violence, rather than physical violence.

Sorel's affirmation of the leap of faith, action and violence underscored the pluralistic character of his ideas. He did not hold a monocausal explanation of history, like Marx, and believed, like Bergson, that creativity was not predetermined. With Pareto and Mosca he looked for pluralistic explanations to questions of psychology, history, ethics, and philosophy. Even his political beliefs displayed this pluralism, for syndicalism was

opposed to the concept of a powerful, united state which did not recognize the existence of a heterogeneous society. Action and violence admitted that a number of methods could be utilized to arrive at a multiplicity of societies, that more than one technique was possible. Permanent, unchangeable laws did not exist except within strict limits, such as in technology and morality, since ideas corresponded with actions. Reality was always multiple, and everything was transitory, leading to the necessity for the continual revision of laws based on ever changing technology. Unfortunately philosophy had failed to keep pace with science, and was still bent on establishing unity in thought.

ii. Religion and Scission

Along with the leap of faith, and the importance of action, a third concept upon which Sorel's philosophy of language was based developed from his religious nature. He did not have a firm belief in God, but rather he had the type of mind that may lead to faith, which has a transcendental recognition of "le mal", the mystical, the otherworldly, and the unbridgable gap between the two extremes of the human condition. The truth must be faced, even if it offers man a path bordering on horror, and even if it arrives in a vision or a flash of time. Part of the religious nature is the emphasis on extremes, such as the idea of violence. There are no external certainties for all men at all times, merely internal truths which each

man must face in his own way. Even though religion and irrationalism are two very different categories, they both insist that man--his motives, his passions, his intuition--can not be understood in a scientific, comprehensive sense.

In an analysis of Sorel's style of thought, it would be possible to argue logically that he was more religious than political, more Jansenistic than socialistic. Edouard Berth and Max Ascoli both concluded that he belonged to the older, secret and hidden France of Pascal, Proudhon, and Flaubert. He retained the Jansenistic consciousness of the "miserable human condition, for election and reprobation, and for the ideal of moral strenuousness amid the precariousness and vagaries of society and its institutions."²³ Sorel felt a strong bond for Pascal's ideas, although not for reasons of faith. "Instinctivement il était un janseniste tourmenté par le problème du mal."²⁴ He was always marked by a refusal to compromise, a belief in "all or nothing", and by a pessimistic dislike of the Enlightenment, particularly with its faith in science. It was one of the bonds that he had in common with contemporaries like Charles Péguy and Henri Bergson. In 1910 Sorel said of Bergson with relish, "le Dieu de Pascal a vaincu le Dieu de Descartes."²⁵

There is no doubt that Sorel always regarded religion as one of the main forces in life, and spiritual

forces to be of some importance, even to the non-believer, although he agreed that it was possible to live without religion (such as in China). This attitude was entirely different from that of Freud who attempted to show that religion is an illusion, a form of wish-fulfillment, useless in comprehending reality outside ourselves. Sorel would never have agreed with Freud that "a turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth."²⁶ The importance that he attached to religion was shared by Hulme, who saw religion as a basic human need. A belief in God led to a profound feeling of unworthiness, but the absence of a belief in God meant a belief that man is God. Sorel and Hulme's attitude was more that of writers like André Saurès or Malraux who sought religious beliefs outside the conventional framework of religion, or like T. S. Eliot, who believed that it was an error to think that culture could live without religion.

One reason Sorel was interested in religious questions, particularly those in history, was because religion had emphasized the irrational, mystical side of thought and action. For too long this area had been ignored by scientists and rationalists, particularly in historical studies. Even psychology ignored the strength of religious feeling in man and society, although the success of Bergson's L'Évolution créatrice was one indication of how the idea of

mystery was still very strong. This book showed "un manifeste signifiant aux modernes que la principale préoccupation des philosophes doit être de réfléchir sur les mystères de la vie."²⁷ The religious sentiment was an irradicable faculty, as important as reason.

J'estime, pour ma part, que . . .
la faculté mystique est chose très
réelle dans l'homme, et l'expérience
nous montre qu'elle ne diminue pas
d'intensité au travers des âges; elle
reste aussi puissante aujourd'hui
qu'elle a toujours été; elle n'est
pas affaiblie par le développement
scientifique.²⁸

In the nineteenth century science had always been emphasized at the expense of religion, ignoring the fact that each represented two separate aspects of the human character which could not always be judged by the standard of the other. In Sorel's own categories, based on those of Ribot,²⁹ (Hulme was also influenced by Ribot) religions had two functions: to protect men from the never ending threat of evil (decadence for Sorel); and secondly, they were "social disciplines whose action successfully complements that of the laws."³⁰ Religions also showed the force of the bund in history.

Another reason that Sorel was interested in religion, besides the mystical aspect, was because the church in history had stressed a cleavage from contemporary society, a cleavage to which Sorel applied the key term of scission. Scission involved the strength and ability to

go to extremes, just as men like Hulme, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Hesse emphasized. Not only could syndicalism and socialism learn from religion the importance of irrational forces, but they must also stress the gulf, this concept of scission. There must be a sharp, distinctive opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeois-democratic society, just as there had been between Christianity and Roman society, or between any holders of a myth and the engulfing society. Only by preserving such a gap could corruption be defeated. Traditionally art and literature had stressed the amount of blood split by the martyrs, just as it was necessary to emphasize the violence needed in the future revolution. Sorel thought to gain through syndicalism a means of educating the proletariat in this idea of scission, just as the Bible had educated the early Christians, stressing the heroic ideal and rejecting materialism and compromise. The syndicates must take the role of the monasteries, a hard, austere, elite who would preserve in themselves the idea of scission and serve as the leadership of the forthcoming struggle. This elite must be extraordinarily dedicated if they were to crush the powerful forces of decadence. The idea of scission, the need for withdrawal and the rejection of society stressed the pessimistic aspect of religion. If such a break was necessary, then it was obvious how difficult the struggle would be.

Scission must be found in all aspects of life, even the most basic, such as morality. Indeed, "les transformations économiques ne peuvent se réaliser si les travailleurs n'ont pas acquis un degré supérieur de culture morale."³¹ Moralism could not be imposed from outside, by laws or by the bourgeoisie, but was an expression of inner purity and sublimity. The morality imposed on the proletariat by the bourgeoisie was a slave morality, based on appeals (drawn from Christianity) to charity, benevolence, and respect, and intent upon creating an atmosphere of obedience between the worker and the owner. The true morality of the proletariat would encourage the spirit of responsibility, the value of personal dignity, and the energy of initiative. Thus "la morale" meant not only the simpler virtues, such as the traditional rules of conduct existing in the past, but also possessed the larger connotation of the bonds that formed a new social order. But true morality could not exist without action and struggle, or without building heroic qualities of dignity and grandeur. It must be built in the family or the class, through production or war. "C'est dans cette nouvelle évaluation de toutes les valeurs par le prolétariat militant que consiste la haute originalité du socialisme contemporain."³² The proletariat would create a new standard by which to judge human acts or, using an expression of Nietzsche's, "une nouvelle évolution de toutes les valeurs."³³

None of the men usually concerned with irrationalism, such as Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud, James, Sorel or Pareto, was opposed to rationalism. They simply refused to admit that it formed more than one part of man's intelligence, or even the major proportion. Reason gave a very limited, relative picture of the world, based solely on man's perception, and could not account for emotion, intuition, disorder, or any of the irrational area of man's life.

The philosophy of rationalism was also unable to convey the flowing feeling of movement, of the discontinuous that was one of the major aspects of life. Sorel used the ideas of the leap of faith, action, the ricorso, the diremption and scission in an attempt to convey this sense of movement. "The pessimist regards social conditions as forming a system bound together by an iron law which cannot be evaded, so that the system is given, as it were, in one block, and cannot disappear except in a catastrophe which involves the whole."³⁴ Each historical block was distinctly separated by scission from each other. Man in history moved via the leap of faith from one block to the next, in giant steps, not gradual evolution.

However, in Sorel's work, as in the work of many of his generation, there existed the conflicting problem of the continuous. What was there, in essence, that was common to all the separate blocks or systems, that ran

through them all, like a continual thread of meaning? Part of the answer to this question he found in tradition, and in the continual reappearance of heroic virtues. Another aspect can be found in an examination of his views on art, which he always placed on the same level as philosophy and religion as activities of the free spirit. Art was not to be shunted off to the sidelines of life, for it was an integral, essential part of human society, "la loi cachée de toute la critique historique."³⁵

iii. Art as a Symbol

Just as with his ideas on language and communication, Sorel never devised a clear philosophy on art. Nevertheless, he seemed to regard art as another form of communication, distinct from language, and enabling the viewer to grasp feelings and beliefs, shadows and nuances that words could never convey. Like Hulme, Sorel believed that "art was the key to the psychology of an age and its culture,"³⁶ since art was determined by the artist in society, not society by the artist.

Sorel's interest in artistic questions, a facet of his thought ignored by most historians, can be tied to a resurgence of interest in general in the artist's role in society, and also to the fact that the Paris of his day was one of the artistic centers of the western world. Sorel was particularly interested in sculpture, which really began in its modern form with the Rumanian sculptor

Brancusi in Paris around 1910. Paris was also the home of Les Fauves, painters such as Matisse, Dufy and Braque, and of Picasso, who had painted Les Demoiselles d'Avignon in 1907, with its strong sense of revolt. Cubism, with its new vision, had elements comparable to Hulme's views on art, particularly in its emphasis on geometry. In Futurism there was a revolutionary vitality and energy, with a great feeling of excitement. It was at this time, and in the following decades, that some artists took their personal involvement in society much more seriously. The role of the artist shifted from that of an onlooker to personal involvement, where the artist often used his own life as an example of art.

Sorel has been linked by Meakin not only to French artists (some of whom he knew personally) but also to the German expressionists, men like Ernst Toller, the revolutionary poet and playwright, and Gustav Landauer, the socialist writer. Péguy and Sorel had stylistic differences from this group, but shared in the revolt against a decadent and morally dangerous society, and in an exaltation of work and creativity. This German movement, when seeking a "literature of activism" looked to France for leadership, to Sorel, Pelloutier, Péguy, Rolland and Gide. All these writers sought a moral purification through intuition, and a rejection of intellectualization, progress, science and parliamentary democracy. They stressed the

morality of work, although they differed in tactics and their awareness of the industrial world. This stress on the morality of work linked them to Camus and Simone Weil.

Despite his deep interest in artistic questions, Sorel found much to dislike in the art that he saw about him. Partly this was due to the fact that, like ideology and language, many forms of art were representative of the bourgeois spirit. Sorel seemed to have a most amused attitude towards bourgeois art forms, an amusement that can be summed up in a statement of his on Meyerbeer: "un idiot sonore, qui fabrique consciencieusement une sorte de matière qui fait penser à un gâteau trop sucré qui ferait explosion dans l'estomac."³⁷ Just as he did not condemn bourgeois society per se, but rather the fact that the bourgeoisie had become lazy, passive, and decadent, so he condemned contemporary society for preferring Meyerbeer to Berlioz, Wagner, and Debussy.

. . . La peinture est tombée dans l'absurde, dans l'incohérence de formes imbéciles. La musique déraille et devient une mathématique de sons, où il n'y a plus la moindre inspiration. L'architecture se tortille sans qu'on sache pourquoi, en attendant qu'elle devienne des amas de cubes, un de ces quatre matins. J'ai bien peur que la littérature entre à son tour dans la danse de la mort, la mort du style. Nous commençons à voir des pages où il y a un mot en haut à gauche, un point d'exclamation en dessous, en bas à droite trois mots qui n'ont aucun rapport de logique entre eux. En somme, le faux art prend une forme, dans toute ses branches, qui semble bien avoir été conçue dans un cabanon.³⁸

Sorel was particularly contemptuous of artists who followed the bourgeoisie in painting, so that their work merely resembled advertisement. "Les artistes dits d'avantgarde sont presque tous des parfaits bourgeois, dont l'esprit n'a jamais été effleuré par aucune poésie."³⁹ Even in architecture the motif was simply a glorification of money. Men like D'Annunzio and Barrès would never be great writers, since they missed the essential qualities of the heart and the soul.⁴⁰ The problem was that a correlation existed between artistic faults and the manner in which men lived politically and socially. "Mal écrire, mal peindre, mal composer, mal construire, cela ressemble beaucoup à mal conduire les affaires publiques, mal parler, mal agir dans la domaine de l'État."⁴¹

If, therefore, Sorel did not approve of bourgeois art, it is necessary to examine what art he did like, since he believed art to be of such essential importance. Basically for Sorel, art had to possess four distinctive qualities: that it was tied to production (artificial nature), that it had elements which could not be analyzed, that it possessed the hardness demonstrated in geometric art and that it revealed evidence of the struggle towards the sublime.

A great attraction of Marxism was its character of "philosophie des bras" as opposed to a "philosophie des têtes." Art in the future would be firmly tied to work and

like work, would share a grasp of reality. Essentially Marx had been correct in placing the artist on the same rung of the ladder as the manual worker. "Seule la pratique de l'art par les plus grands artistes lui permettait de concevoir la marche du travail dans un régime de haute production socialiste."⁴² Stanley has listed the three characteristics, according to Sorel, that artists, warriors, and producers shared in common. First, the experiences of all were active and creative, and all of them needed epics to lead men towards heroism. Secondly, that which they created had to be experienced directly and could not be analyzed. Thirdly, they lived especially on mysteries, shadows and indeterminate nuances since production is "the most mysterious aspect of human activity."⁴³

Since the greatest art for Sorel was linked to work or production, he was particularly attracted to the art forms that were the most solid or physical, such as sculpture and architecture. For this reason he often praised the art of the ancient Greeks and that of the Middle Ages.

During the Gothic period, the arts had an organization as solid as a system of production can have. At that time, they were integrated in the most intimate way with the trades. The Renaissance completely changed the position of the artists, who were no longer mixed with artisans and who were elevated to the status of the literati . . . the new order had a disastrous effect on the destiny of art.⁴⁴

The Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages was possessed by great virility and youthfulness because of its link with production. But even in small objects, "une marmite en cuivre ingénieusement repoussée"⁴⁵ could demonstrate more talent than the grandest monument erected in a public place in honour of some national glory, for although it was modest, it was part of reality, part of the technical world. Thus art is "an anticipation of the highest and technically most perfect forms of production."⁴⁶ Just as literature was revolutionized more by a change in language, than by any change in content, so art moved through changes in material or technique. One vital fact was that ". . . l'art sera, en quelque sorte, le moyen par lequel l'infusion de l'intelligence dans le travail manuel se manifestera aux yeux des travailleurs."⁴⁷

The second aspect of art was that it had qualities which could not be analyzed. Sorel rejected any false mysticism, or artificiality, such as the attempt by the romantics to copy the constructions of the Middle Ages in neo-Gothic structures, which were made by conscious effort, and were thus void of real meaning. Progress in art, like progress in any field except technology, was impossible since "l'art, le vrai, est un maximum."⁴⁸ This was a fault of the bourgeoisie who still believed that art, like science, reproduced reality in an imperfect fashion, but little by little men would discover this reality. Bourgeois art

had also over-emphasized the importance of the individual, divorced from society, unlike art in earlier periods. This emphasis on the individual always focused on his most elusive qualities such as the relationship between individuals or his temperament and these were necessarily very difficult to express. Contrary to this, and far more useful to society as a whole, "les personnages de Molière sont des anonymes portant des noms typiques."⁴⁹ Art owed much to rare geniuses, to innovative, solitary individuals who were only successful when society had evolved towards them. Geniuses could show their contemporaries in a physical manner those things that they could only sense vaguely before. Often the masses did not appreciate geniuses, and, indeed, it was a rare individual who did so.

Among the stone-carvers who sculptured the statues in the cathedrals there were men of great talent who seem always to have remained anonymous; nevertheless they produced masterpieces We might . . . question whether their contemporaries suspected that these artists of genius had raised edifices of unperishable glory; it seems very probable to me that the cathedrals were only admired by the artists.⁵⁰

The third quality of art was a form of hardness, a view similar to those of T. E. Hulme, whose ideas on geometric art (e.g., the work of Picasso or Epstein) summarized his philosophical concepts as well. Geometric art had moved away from "the messiness and confusion of nature and natural things."⁵¹ The distinguishing qualities were austerity, concentration, bareness, structure,

abstraction (not empathy), a translation of the "changing and limited into something unlimited and necessary."⁵²

. . . as far as one can see, this will culminate, not so much in the simple geometric forms found in archaic art, but in the more complicated ones associated in our minds with the idea of machinery where will be found the specific differentiating quality of the new art.⁵³

Both Sorel and Hulme believed that "art is found in the contemplation of finite things,"⁵⁴ one of which was the machine. Art was a vital medium for the expression of the human soul, and a strong example of the need for humanity to find freedom in following the dictates of its consciousness, not those of ideologies. Art is a "reality which begets ideas and not . . . an appreciation of ideas."⁵⁵

Although Sorel preferred sculpture and architecture to other artistic forms, he was also sympathetic towards poetry, because poetry had the essential quality of inspiration. "Je me demande si les derniers hommes utiles, sur les ruines des civilisations modernes, ce ne seront pas les poètes."⁵⁶ Poems that sought eternal absolutes were useless (which was what Hulme believed), as were those that degraded the minds and emotions of the people, or those, like Victor Hugo's, that hopped from a political topic to its opposite, with abandon. The best poets composed magnificent verse recalling past and present heroism. ". . . le poète, en chantant, en des vers magnifiques, la gloire des ancêtres et en rappelant

l'héroïsme du temps passé, accomplissait une mission grande et sainte."⁵⁷ On an even higher level than poetry was music, which was able to arouse the most noble and sublime sentiments without resorting to the disfiguring abilities of words.

Bach, Handel, Beethoven . . . Voilà les hommes qui competent, et c'est dans leur langage, si incompréhensible au commun des hommes, que l'on découvre les secrets d'une ordonnance de pensée tout à fait surhumaine. Il y a, chez les musiciens, un mélange d'imagination poétique et de mathématique qui les place au-dessus de tous les arts"58

Music was as important to contemporary society as sculpture had been to the ancient Greeks. Sculpture was as representative of Greek philosophy as music was of the sense of movement and becoming in modern philosophy.

The fourth essential quality of art was that it must reveal the struggle towards the sublime. T. E. Hulme developed a dichotomic view of art, and a corresponding view of man that was split between romanticism and classicism. The artistic viewpoints had their counterparts in philosophy. The root of romanticism was "that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities,"⁵⁹ while the classical view was that "man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organization that anything decent can be got out of him."⁶⁰ What the classical, tragic view saw was the complete

insignificance of man, while romanticism and humanism made man into a god. Classicism had the "faulty of mind to see things as they really are."⁶¹ Thus, in a philosophical sense, Hulme opposed humanism, romanticism, and vital art to a religious attitude, classicism and abstract art. Sorel himself referred to a Latin or Cornelian conception of virtue,⁶² rather than Hulme's classical-romantic opposition. A Latin mind stressed direct action, the personal, the individual will and deeds, where the future was bleak, and danger, tragedy and death threatened. Daniel Halévy stated that Charles Maurras "was a man of the Mediterranean: his mind conceived clear-cut forms to which death would put a term . . . the hard mind which points out where danger lies, even mortal danger."⁶³ Sorel had something of the same despair, the same knowledge of disorder and destruction. To Hulme's emphasis on tradition and organization, Sorel added the myth and heroism, but his view of man was as bleak. "Le réel n'est pas toujours chose agréable."⁶⁴ What a tragic view was able to do was to see clearly, and to do so it must use existing elements, as a sculptor used the available materials. For this reason, even the cafe songs of the workers had value if they helped in the struggle towards the sublime. "Le monde actuel est condamné à la tristesse: il ne faut pas lui refuser les moyens qui sont à sa disposition pour éviter d'être submergé par la douleur."⁶⁵ This was why the Gothic

architecture of the Middle Ages was so successful, because the Church "élève des constructions ayant pour objet de frapper fortement l'imagination, d'inspirer l'étonnement."⁶⁶

In the future, the syndicates and workers would be concerned not only with industrial problems, but with artistic, religious, and educational ones as well. The workers already possessed the fourth quality of art, the search for the sublime, since "les classes pauvres ont le sens du tragique extrêmement développé. La vie dure . . . entraine à regarder en face les situations parfois les plus intolérables."⁶⁷ In the attainment of their ricorso the workers would have to abandon middle class culture to form their own art, which would be developed on the basis of utility, since "work can serve as the basis for a culture."⁶⁸ The medieval builders of the towering cathedrals of Europe had succeeded because they were in a guild, which was essentially the same as the bund, a disciplined group separate from the rest of society and containing a myth of poetic character, a Cité esthétique. "In the Middle Ages the worker's guilds, which included a few men with talent of the highest order, imposed their building methods, their decorative tastes and their conception of what distinguishes a great work, on the sovereigns, the bourgeoisie and the clergy."⁶⁹ They were so isolated from the ecclesiastical world that they had great independence (just as Sorel believed that the

Greek warriors had had). "When artists in society form a sort of caste in which all members are equal, they find themselves in the best circumstances for the free development of art."⁷⁰ Thus an artistic character, which would help in the struggle against decadence, could be developed in the proletariat through their bund, the syndicate. The emphasis would be upon the collectivity, not on the individual, on order, not disorder, and on power and energy. The bund had far greater power and strength than isolated individuals. Therefore the syndicates would be the core of art in the future.

Conclusion

In a conference in 1908, Sorel said that the mind had three sharply defined areas. One was a very narrow area of the spirit, "la domaine de la science", where the mind could touch the Absolute through such means as pure mathematics. At the other end of consciousness was an equally small section where the Absolute was reached through moral and religious ideas. Between the two was a huge area, occupying almost all of our consciousness, which was the area of daily life where logic worked very poorly.⁷¹ If logic was of no value, then it was necessary for men to construct another means of understanding this area of the spirit. Sorel felt that this could partly be accomplished by creativity which was found in technology, and in the leap of faith that seeks

to overcome decadence. Awareness of man's true nature will arrive through the heroic search by the bund for the sublime. Only by remaining continually alert to the existence of mystery and la morale, and the need for scission, can man hope to transcend nature. But since the world that man inhabited had so many irrational, pluralistic elements, Sorel believed that it was also impossible to use a rational, scientific language to describe it. Instead, Sorel offered both a criticism of language, and a means of understanding mysticism, action, and motivation with the help of images and myths, not words.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

¹Talmon, p.48.

²Sorel said of Vico, "ce grand génie", (Matériaux d'une théorie du Prolétariat, p.66), that the work of the Italian philosopher had been extremely useful for his own studies.

³Georges Sorel, preface to Fernand Pelloutier, Histoire des Bourses du Travail, (Paris: 1902), p.32.

⁴Matériaux d'une théorie du Prolétariat, p.66.

⁵Ibid., p.66.

⁶James H. Meisel, The Genesis of Georges Sorel: An Account of his Formative Period followed by a Study of his Influence (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The George Wahr Publishing Co., 1951), p.267, fn.59.

⁷Matériaux d'une théorie du Prolétariat, p.5.

⁸Ibid., p.6.

⁹"On s'expose donc à tomber dans de graves sophismes en employant nos symboles dans des conditions qui sont inconciliables avec la nature de leur génération . . ."
Ibid., p.15.

¹⁰Hughes, p.173.

¹¹Lettres à Delesalle, p.175.

¹²T. E. Hulme, Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art, edited by Herbert Read, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1924), p.3.

¹³Ibid., p.30.

¹⁴Douglas Parmée, "Georges Sorel: A Reconsideration," The Cambridge Journal V (October, 1951-September, 1952), p.356.

¹⁵Andreu, p.74.

¹⁶"Action is the principal condition of life, health and strength in an organized being . . . For there to be action . . . there must be some ground that exists in relation to the action subject . . . and that resists and opposes the acting self. Action, therefore, is a struggle. To act is to fight." Proudhon, quoted in Stanley, p.22.

¹⁷Procès de Socrates, p.172.

¹⁸Wood has drawn a parallel between Aristotle's conclusions and the ancient physical concept that matter at rest is more natural than matter in motion. Wood, p.85.

¹⁹Variot, p.54 and p.55.

²⁰Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), p.12.

²¹Deroo, p.17.

²²The Illusions of Progress, p.157.

²³G. H. Williams, "Four Modalities of Violence, With Special Reference to the Writings of Georges Sorel," Journal of Church and State, (Spring 1974), p.239.

²⁴Mario Missiroli, quoted in Max Ascoli, Georges Sorel (Paris: Librairie Paul Delesalle, 1921), p.133.

²⁵Pierre Andreu, "Bergson et Sorel," Les Études Bergsoniennes, III (1952), p.51.

²⁶Sigmund Freud, Future of an Illusion (London: Hogarth Press Ltd., 1955), p.39.

²⁷Andreu, Notre Maître M. Sorel, p.253.

²⁸De l'Église et de l'État, p.31.

²⁹Theodule Ribot was the holder of the first chair of experimental psychology at the College de France (1892).

³⁰Illusions of Progress, p.179.

³¹Matériaux d'une théorie du Prolétariat, p.125.

³²Georges Sorel, preface to Saverio Merlino, Formes et Essence du Socialisme (Paris: V. Giard et E. Brière, 1898), p.xlv.

³³Ibid., p. xlii.

³⁴Reflections on Violence, p.33.

³⁵"Lettere di Georges Sorel a Benedetto Croce," CXII.

³⁶Alun R. Jones, The Life and Opinions of T. E. Hulme (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p.111.

³⁷Quoted in Jean Variot Propos de Georges Sorel (Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Française, 1935), p.188.

³⁸Ibid., p.248.

³⁹De l'utilité du Pragmatisme, p.142.

⁴⁰"Lettere di Georges Sorel a Benedetto Croce," CCLXVII.

⁴¹Variot, p.248.

⁴²Andreu, p.228.

⁴³Stanley, p.40.

⁴⁴The Illusions of Progress, p.183.

⁴⁵Introduction à l'économie moderne, p.418.

⁴⁶Reflections on Violence, p.243.

⁴⁷Andreu, p.230.

⁴⁸Variot, p.230.

- ⁴⁹D'Aristote à Marx, p.181.
- ⁵⁰Reflections on Violence, p.246.
- ⁵¹Speculations, p.96.
- ⁵²Ibid., p.106.
- ⁵³Ibid., p.104.
- ⁵⁴Ibid., p.11.
- ⁵⁵Reflections on Violence, p.233.
- ⁵⁶Variot, p.44.
- ⁵⁷Ibid.
- ⁵⁸Ibid.
- ⁵⁹Speculations, p.116.
- ⁶⁰Ibid.
- ⁶¹Ibid., p.133.
- ⁶²Le Procès de Socrate, p.48.
- ⁶³Halèvy, p.106.
- ⁶⁴Variot, p.231.
- ⁶⁵Introduction a l'économie moderne, p.415.
- ⁶⁶Georges Sorel, La Ruine du Monde Antique: Conception matérialiste de l'Histoire (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1933), p.94.
- ⁶⁷Variot, p.23.
- ⁶⁸The Illusions of Progress, p.157.

⁶⁹From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy Edited by John L. Stanley, translated by John and Charlotte Stanley, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.263.

⁷⁰Ibid., p.264. Quote by Eugene Viollet-le-Duc.

⁷¹Andreu, p.246.

CHAPTER IV

SOREL'S USE OF LANGUAGE

i. The Attack on Language

In Sorel's theory of knowledge a division existed between those areas of life that man can understand clearly, such as technology, and those he cannot, such as religion. He had proposed several methods by which man could arrive at, or understand, la connaissance, such as the leap of faith, scission, the diremption or art. But before examining his more elaborate concept of the myth, it would be useful to examine Sorel's attack on language. It has often been said of Sorel that "one cannot search for meaning in the twentieth century without crossing his path,"¹ and yet his frequent references to the problem of language have been ignored by historians, despite the growing interest in Vico's theories on language,² and the enormous importance that the study of language and the myth has had in recent years. However, since Sorel never formulated a succinct theory of language (apart from his emphasis on the myth), it will be necessary to summarize the problem as he saw it, before arriving at his final, somewhat primitive, conclusions.

Like his mentor Vico, Sorel denied "the very

possibility of an unaltering, logically perfect language, constructed to reflect the basic structure of reality,"³ since "minds (ingenia) are formed by the character of language, not language by the minds of those who speak it."⁴ As language was an expression of the group, not the individual, it varied historically with nationality, with culture, and with class. Since knowledge is characterized by the pillars it employs, and since language is one of these pillars, then knowledge is dependent upon the tool of language, not on simple observations and conclusions concerning external reality. Men must remember that groups and societies could not change unless their language adapted to new conditions since different languages were used for different levels of knowledge.

Since language was not a fixed entity with unaltering meaning, innumerable difficulties would be encountered when studying another historical period. In fact, the language used by groups in history was a cause of events in itself. For example, the French language was based on Roman law, and had retained the organized characteristics of Roman law where each absolute value was assigned a precise word. According to Sorel, historically this had led to confusion, particularly when the Old Testament prophets were studied, for Hebrew ideas had to be translated into a hard, authoritarian Latin and thus lost the ability to express "une infinité de nuances."⁵ From the

point of view of the Church, this linguistic confusion had meant that everything philosophically, even the most simple phrases, was seen as black or white, wrong or right, which in turn enabled the early Church to acclaim the scission from existing society with considerable fervour and enthusiasm. Thus the language had an element of hardness, of power, of absolute revolt, with no vulgar distinctions with which to confuse the masses.⁶ The effect of Roman law in language was also apparent in the Reformation with its passionate prophetic expression of a catastrophic revolution. Even in contemporary times, "nous sommes obligés d'avoir recours aux formules romaines"⁷ in order to explain not only legal relationships but social ones as well. Modern political thought was still so dependent upon the Latin language that "il est donc vrai de dire que l'État est chose romaine."⁸

Sometimes the problem of language lay with the underlying metaphors on which a language was based. In historical studies the philosophies of other ages could be misleading as frequently their figures of speech were different. To understand a philosopher of another era, it was necessary to reproduce the mechanical models by which he reasoned. For example, the Greeks shared with Sorel the idea that "nous sommes des récepteurs et non des moteurs dans la connaissance,"⁹ yet the ancient philosophers did not have the same concept of energy or

force or any precise method to calculate speed. As well, the Greeks had mixed up mechanisms and organisms while modern philosophers had been careful to keep them apart. It was rare to find in Aristotle a doctrine free of concepts borrowed from biology, or even an understanding of immense or minute quantities. Since Greek science was less developed than modern science, in Plato "la théorie de la quantité est souvent assez vague,"¹⁰ yet philosophy and language were based on the recognition of such concepts. The Greeks had used the dialectical method which was sometimes a mere juggling of words, rather than scientific principles based upon observation, and thus they mixed simple and natural categories with complex and artificial ones. Both Sorel and Bergson questioned whether the time had come to abandon the old Greek method of knowledge and language, which had been based on the immutable, on geometry, and not on the real, the mobile and the continuous.

The problem of language was not simply one of translation difficulties or of concepts based on another era, for it could also be found in the class structure of a modern society. Because of his political interests, Sorel focused on the differences between the language of the bourgeoisie, particularly their use of what he labelled as "formulas", and the language of the proletariat.

Frequently Sorel's criticisms of the bourgeoisie are directed not at their wealth or their power but at

their misuse of words, their distortion of language, and to the historically unique position they had given to intellectuals. What Sorel loathed was "casuistry", which he said was characteristic of a degraded society, such as the bourgeois democratic state. Men like Jaurès also were guilty of casuistry and those French socialists who entered bourgeois parliaments. Bourgeois language was tired and weak, full of grandiose words that meant nothing.¹¹ Even the Declaration of the Rights of Man seemed "only a colourless collection of abstract and confused formulas, without any great practical bearing."¹² Another example was equality, which was an important word for democratic society, but a legal and factual absurdity for Sorel. Bourgeois language, because it was based upon a class that had assumed power as clerks took "the form of opinions given by jurists, historians or scientists on problems put to them. It thus assumed heavily the form of scholarly doctrines where all opinion depended on abstract ideas, general theories and philosophical doctrines,"¹³ remote from everyday matters. Even in the field of education the bourgeoisie taught children to see things unscientifically, and to develop, through an artificial manner, an aversion to everything that did not conform to the recognized system of thought.

Bourgeois and democratic language was especially inclined to give birth to what Sorel called "formulas".

These abstract concepts, which were originally social and philosophical theories that had been transformed into rigid dogma, led to the most paradoxical misconceptions and misinterpretations, and combined absurd opposites. They were not just a class construction but were intrinsic to the French language since the time of Descartes, and the subsequent over-emphasis upon logic and clarification, the new instead of the old, revolution instead of tradition. The disciple of Sorel, Edouard Berth, said that "le génie francias . . . n'est satisfait que lorsqu'il a trouvé la formule logique, la loi générale, l'idée claire et distincte chère à Descarte."¹⁴ Often there was wide disparity between the grandiloquence and universality of the formulas, and the modesty of the real goal. Formulas were used, reasonably at times, to facilitate the transition between ideas, just as when Marx adopted previous formulas for purposes of propaganda in the milieu where they had been commonly used. "C'est une nécessité qui s'impose à presque tous les novateurs - tant les abstractions ont de puissance sur notre esprit."¹⁵ Problems arose, however, when intellectuals tried to use their formulas as scientific axioms, unrolling them in a long chain of definitions. So many areas of the human mind and society are not susceptible to linguistic definitions that formulas here are misleading and mistaken. The point of a formula was that it did not describe motivation. Unfortunately, according to Sorel, parlia-

mentary socialists were particularly given to employing formulas at all times. Sorel has been frequently chastized by moderate historians for his inordinate dislike of Jean Jaurès, but one reason for this hatred was Sorel's feeling that Jaurès was a man whose speech was dominated by such formulas, by "big words and bad reasons."¹⁶

The difficulty with formulas was that they destroyed any sense of movement and practical activity, and fossilized ideas. Even men like Marx and William James used formulas, and to follow their theories via their formulas was a complicated, difficult enterprise. It was far more useful to follow the spirit rather than the precise words of such philosophies as Marxism or pragmatism, not using the abstract formulas in too detailed a sense. According to Sorel, for Marx, "plus ses expressions sont générales, moins il leur accordait d'importance."¹⁷ Only by following the spirit could the true fertility, force, and value of such doctrines become apparent. Another method was to look below the surface of words and formulas, which are often borrowed by men or by classes from other sources, distorting their meaning and sense, such as when Rousseau had first used "citizen" specifically to signify his particular place in the society of Geneva.¹⁸

One reason that formulas were so strong in language was because of the social character of language, which meant that men were often victims of the language

they had learnt as children, which was the strongest means that they had for expressing their thoughts. Years after children had been taught in school to identify la Patrie with la France their minds were still being influenced by these indelible abstract formulas. Thus men who had been educated since the war of 1870, in an era when rationalist thought was emphasized, still used a republican and nationalistic vocabulary.

La force des formules abstraites et leur permanence dépassent tout ce qu'on peut imaginer; de même que nous ne savons bien exprimer nos pensées que dans notre langue maternelle, nous finissons par nous attacher, d'une manière particulière, aux idées que nous manifestons en nous servant des acquisitions les plus anciennes de notre mémoire.¹⁹

The clearest example Sorel gives of the influence of childhood language upon later ideologies was that of Karl Marx. In order to understand Marx, Sorel said that his critics must first examine the teaching in German universities in the first third of the nineteenth century. Marx was particularly influenced by the tendencies at that point in history to reconstruct the world by artistic intuition, and to generalize, and by the tendency of the left wing radical Hegelian writers to épater les bourgeois, ". . . son âme était pleine de souvenirs romantiques."²⁰ One reason that Marxism became confusing at times to its adherents was that Marx had to use the language of the ruling bourgeoisie, and was thus unable to explain some

of the fundamentals of his theory. For this reason, Sorel felt no qualms about revising Marx. With the appearance of a new vocabulary, such as that derived from Bergson, it was then possible to describe the new sociological facts and clarify the obscure parts of Marx. In fact, Sorel said that Marx had never meant his description of the revolution to be taken as the literal truth, for what Marx was really doing was describing a mythical revolution, the ideal, in terms of images.

Bourgeois democratic society also relied heavily on rhetoric, as well as on formulas, but the goal of rhetoric is simply persuasion, whether of the people or of the rulers, and includes no moral goals or methods. Rhetoric is a prostitution of "le savoir, la logique et l'éloquence,"²¹ yet rhetoric is a leading quality of the bourgeoisie. Sorel was particularly alert to the use of rhetoric and the subtlety of persuasion since he lived in an era when journalists were very powerful. His critique of democracy was inseparable from his feelings about the ineffectiveness of bourgeois language. Like Robert Michels, he felt that "the essential characteristic of democracy is found in the readiness with which it succumbs to the magic of words" ²²

The essential fact for the proletariat to remember was that they needed a new language. In order for any ideology to have power and strength it must recognize that

there is more than one kind of language, and that a strong ideology must transform the old language in order to give new sense to old formulas. Revolutionaries cannot use old moral stories and old metaphysical hypotheses.²³ They should look at the success of Christianity which had the singular fortune to develop outside its original language domain. Determinism, not free will, was fundamental. Even the nominalists had recognized the importance of language, and had brought the problem back to a human level by saying that language depended on the individual, but they had viewed only one side of the question. Medieval doctrines, such as grace or salvation by work, had reinforced the idea of the individual as an isolated unit. But man was "un travailleur social,"²⁴ and it was on this social character that it would be possible to establish a new knowledge of man. The abstract, isolated individual without family or society would soon be only a memory.

Socialism had lost the essential element of scission because language had lost its primitive power and strength. If socialism was to succeed, as Christianity had done in the past, it must develop a clear and distinct form of communication to use as a motivating force, and must rid itself of the casuistry of degenerate, bourgeois language. Words must be used to describe passion and emotion, not just stark facts or scientific beliefs. Here Sorel's unceasing regard for the proletariat was of

importance for he believed, like Vico, that in history the common people had known a basic wisdom which understood things and expressed them in a poetic sense long before "la pensée réfléchie"²⁵ could express or understand them theoretically. Socialists must build a new language on the revolutionary traditions and legends of the sans-culottes which truly interest the people, and form their brand of poetry. Sorel felt that this language could be achieved through the creation of myths. All political work is concerned with the future, suppressing the present, and trying to bind the past and the future into an ideal movement. Only myths express this ideal life. Myths, however, must be based on new and quite radical images, or figures of speech.

ii. Precision in language

In his analysis of the differences between languages in history, and the use of language by different social classes, Sorel was denying the existence of an objective, tangible language, which described an unchanging world of reality. Part of his attack on this logical, scientific world has already been seen in the emphasis he placed upon movement and struggle, and the inexplicable goal of the 'sublime'. A second line of attack consisted of his dislike of precision, both in the written and the spoken word. He seemed to feel that too great a degree of precision led to the destruction of the object or concept that was being

described. According to Daniel Halévy, Péguy had also thought along these lines, under the influence of Pascal, and Sorel was to be influenced by Péguy. "It is in flashes and stray gleams that creation is revealed to us. Systematic minds run their systems headlong up blind alleys, because they try to link what we are given separate, and to compose into a whole what we are given as broken pieces."²⁶

Sorel's attack on precision can most clearly be seen in his style of writing, a style for which he has frequently been chastized, but which some critics have reasonably identified as that "belonging to the breed of apostles rather than to the breed of reasoners."²⁷ To a certain extent the confusing qualities of his philosophy can be attributed to the sheer bulk of his work. He wrote an enormous amount, especially when it is remembered that he began his second career when he was forty-two. However, none of Sorel's doctrines can be found in a coherent synthesis. Even his books seldom have one theme, but range from topic to topic, occasionally beginning a new concept while still supporting an older, opposing one. Thus a contradiction in his style of writing seems to parallel a shift in his political alliances. One critic wrote of the "ever shifting dunes of the Sorelian landscape."²⁸ Sorel's works are difficult to follow because he often neglected the transitions between one remark and the next. The sequence of his ideas is like a leap of

faith, jumping from subject to subject, with no rational development or continuity. There are also numerous points of similarity between Sorel's writing style and that of T. E. Hulme, who was also very unsystematic. Hulme's articles were never assembled in any coherent form until after his death.

However, Sorel reiterated a number of times that he pursued a positive goal in his interrupted style, by trying to make his work so difficult that the reader was forced to become involved and reject the notions he already held. He repeated several times one phrase of Renan's that "la lecture, pour être salulaire, doit être un exercice impliquant quelque travail."²⁹ Thus, for Sorel, obscurity was often a positive quality. He was not worried about his own reputation, but was concerned with making his readers see anew, by having to work at understanding his thought, "pour me corriger et pour me compléter."³⁰ He wanted to evoke ideas, and therefore he neglected the rules of writing in order to jar the reader awake. A harmonious style was an anathema to Sorel.³¹ By rejecting with aversion the classical French style of writing he was also rejecting classicism itself, the classicism which had been appropriated by the bourgeoisie and the academic circles of the Third Republic.

When we proceed to an analysis that probes history the least bit in depth, we perceive that things present an impossible complexity,

that the intellect is unable to analyze or describe them without producing insoluble contradictions. It is better that reality remain protected by a vagueness that philosophy will respect if it wishes to avoid the pitfalls of charlatanism, lies or romanticism.³²

It would be an error in judgment to ignore Sorel's statement that his style was deliberately chosen and was not just the result of carelessness or a lack of concern towards the finer points of grammatical construction. Certainly he was not alone in his difficult style. Halévy said of Péguy, with whom Sorel was so closely associated throughout his most fertile period, that "the toughest obstacle between Péguy and the public was certainly his style."³³ But what Sorel was aiming for was something of the same complexity that he found himself in the work of Cézanne, a painter whose work he did not particularly admire, but whose style continually evoked memories and confusion in the mind of the viewer, long after other painters had been forgotten.³⁴

Linked to this preoccupation with the fluid character of reality, and the mistrust of precision in the written word, was Sorel's own conversational ability. It is perhaps no coincidence that a number of men who were interested in this aspect of language were very erudite, fascinating talkers, such as Sorel, Hulme, Malraux, and Péguy. Certainly the first three could talk for hours in incredible bursts of energy, on an endless

stream of topics. Sorel felt that ideas easily developed in conversation whereas writing was definitely an inferior form of communication.

"C'est terrible d'écrire. Je vois le livre de l'avenir sous cette forme: un disque de phonographe qui récite quelque chose. Ce sera bien plus vivant que l'écriture"35

This conversational ability in itself was a rejection of the logical, coherent, rationalist, system of thought, with its emphasis on clarity, precision and logical development. Since reality did not develop in orderly steps, to speak and think this way meant the imposition of a false and distorted pattern over reality. Hulme has left a description of Bergson giving a lecture that further illustrates this problem of precision in language.

His eyes seemed always to be half-closed, and he gave you all the time the impression of a man describing with great difficulty the shape of something which he just saw. There was a curious pause and a gesture of the thumb and forefinger which looked as if he were pulling a fine thread out of a tangled mass.³⁶

This conversational style of Sorel, Hulme, and Bergson was totally opposed to that of Lenin ("il parle en termes extrêmement simples avec une langue de fer, avec la logique d'une hache"³⁷) or to Barrès. "Il y a toujours, dans tout ce que dit Barrès, une certaine philosophie de l'inévitable. Il constate les faits avec calme, avec froideur même: et Sorel est un passionné."³⁸

Sorel often neglected definitions, and had a

habit of ignoring the distinctions between principles through a fundamental abhorrence of the precise and narrow limitations of words. Too great precision in language led only to the erection of a barrier between men and reality, as the philosophers of the Enlightenment had done. The elusive, fluid quality of reality was then distorted. Often a vocabulary, especially that dealing with abstract, rational systems, was inaccurate because the words had become isolated from their original context. Such theories then led only to confusion. Even the sociological model which Sorel devised, the diremption, must not be generalized or taken out of context, or the meaning would be lost. It was the task of the philosopher to fall neither into the trap of abstract, meaningless formulas, nor that of precise, unbending definitions. ". . . il faut redouter d'apporter une trop grande rigueur dans la langage, parce qu'elle serait en contradiction avec le caractère fluent de la réalité et qu'ainsi la langage serait trompeur."³⁹

But Sorel's philosophy of language was more than just a criticism of abstractions and precision in concepts and words. He also attempted to construct a system of communication that would be more valuable than language in describing the mysterious area of life, and the feeling of energy and movement. He attempted to do this through figures of speech or the image (as Hulme did also), and in greater detail, through the myth.

iii. The Image in Time

The use of images by Sorel is comparable to that of Hulme, although Sorel's understanding of images is very elementary in comparison, forming a type of hidden current in much of his work, whereas Hulme's theories were much more sophisticated. Imagism was "in the air", especially in France where symbolism was a dominant force in French poetry at the turn of the century. Sorel's linguistic theories can be expressed in Hulme's theories, without too much distortion. Ezra Pound labelled the image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."⁴⁰ The qualities of the image, with its sense of the finiteness of man, and the elimination of abstractions and generalities, shares the same qualities as Sorel foresaw in the use of the myth. Furthermore, the image created another world through analogies, a "through-the-glass"⁴¹ effect as Hulme described it, which must be taken whole, or not at all, like the myth. Sorel believed strongly in the use of images or symbols as a means of circumventing the difficulties of language, and as a method of bringing back some form of precision. (Hulme distinguished between symbols and images, but Sorel does not appear to have done so.) For example, although Marx had been criticized for using symbolic language, for Sorel "it is those symbolic portions which were formerly regarded as being of dubious worth that constitute the

definitive value of his work,"⁴² and enabled socialists to "appreciate the scope of the labour movement." Men in history are not motivated by ordinary language but by "a body of images which, by intuition alone,"⁴³ can provoke the "mass of sentiments" leading to great changes. Bergson, too, thought that intuition could only be expressed through images. The emphasis must necessarily be placed on the visual, as Hulme and Sorel did in their theories on art, for the effect of a picture in the mind counter-balances the numbing effect of abstract language. The advantage of the image, whether used poetically by Hulme, or politically by Sorel is that "it depends for its effect not on a kind of half sleep produced, but on arresting the attention."⁴⁴ The disadvantage, which both men ignored, is the crudeness and loss of subtlety.

A major element of the image is that it embodied the concept of the leap of faith, and of scission, for the image had to be taken as a whole. When the image was rejected, it was rejected entirely, and a leap was made to another image, which was also absorbed as a whole. Thus each image was far more precise than language, because its limits were strictly defined. Thus one quality of the image was the element of antinomy, of opposition between contrasting images. Edouard Berth, Sorel's closest disciple, stated that "pour bien comprendre la pensée de Sorel . . . il faut se rendre maître de la théorie des antinomies et

voir à quelle conception du monde et de la vie elle aboutit."⁴⁵ According to Sorel, those philosophers who wished to reduce everything to a heterogeneous unity were always being embarrassed by unclassifiable elements which they either classified as exceptions or drowned in "an ocean of vague phrases. My view, on the contrary, is that the best way of understanding any group of ideas in the history of thought is to bring all the contradictions into sharp relief."⁴⁶

This use of antinomies is similar to a leap of faith for it opposes the building of bridges between two different concepts, and refused to accept that there can be anything in between. Some religious doctrines have also emphasized the spirit of contradiction, such as that of Pascal.⁴⁷ Sorel's theories and vocabulary are dominated by the idea of contradictions. For example, he opposed the past and the future, artificial and natural nature, the eternal and the transitory, the individual and the bund, the consumer and the producer, the political party or the state and the syndicate, the intellectuals and the proletariat, the secular and the religious, the linear and the leap of faith, compromise and scission, ideology and myth, and decadence and the sublime.

The most vital and energetic manner of expressing antinomy was by the creation of images and myths. Condorcet had dreamed of perfecting our "vague and obscure"⁴⁸ language

as it was inadequate for making "knowledge of the truth easy and error almost impossible." Sorel agreed with Condorcet but concluded that it would always be ineffective to use imprecise language as a means of communication. He wished to substitute symbols for concepts, for "it is only with specific terms--the only ones capable of evoking images--that we can express our thoughts accurately without deceiving our readers and ourselves."⁴⁹ Language could only be stretched to a certain point, after which those who thought along certain paths must communicate via symbols. Sorel quoted Newman on this point.

It will be our wisdom to avail ourselves of language, as far as it will go, but to aim mainly, by means of it, to stimulate in those to whom we address ourselves, a mode of thinking and trains of thought similar to our own, leading them on by their own independent action, not by any syllogistic compulsion. Hence it is that an intellectual school will always have something of an esoteric character; for it is an essemblage of minds that think, their bond is unity of thought, and their words become a sort of tessera, not expressing but symbolising it.⁵⁰

In his recognition of the problem of language, Sorel turned again to Vico and his theory of the origin of language. According to Vico, language was first created by the irrational, not the rational faculties of man, by passion and not by logic. Therefore words are images before they are concepts. Vico had criticized Descartes's belief that knowledge could be scientifically reduced to clear and distinct perception, and his disavowal of the

truth of history and poetry. For Vico, "the condition under which a thing can be known is that the knower should have made it, that the true is identical with the created,"⁵¹ and thus language was of primary importance.

For Vico and for Sorel, poetry was one of the basic elements of the mind, for primitive man thinks in poetic images. Sorel was to take Vico's emphasis upon poetry, and apply it to language in general. The best known of his books, Reflections on Violence, perhaps best indicates the poetic nature that Sorel's writing itself contained. Like Nietzsche and Freud, Sorel "combined a poetic insight with a scientific curiosity. They sought consciously for a full picture of man's experience and in that experience they looked for the vitalizing images that have moved him to action."⁵²

Sorel felt that the poetic element was to be found in the recognition of passion and emotion, as well as in the development of images. Descartes had implied that the only aspect of man's mind and soul that was of importance was his pure intellect, not his emotions. Socialists had always erred as well by discussing abstract topics like monopolies and capitalist profits, unlike demagogues who understood the importance of emotion, and appealed to the spirit of men. Sorel strongly decried this approach for "c'est grâce à ce ton de sentiment que nous avons l'immédiate conscience de notre individualité."⁵³ If socialists were more alert to

the existence of suffering (la douleur) they could have rich psychological results. Generally politicians had not given enough attention "à la puissante fixatrice des sentiments dans la vie courante; on raisonne comme si les passions, comme si l'amour étaient des phénomènes pathologiques, étrangers aux lois de la vie normale."⁵⁴

But men usually see reality through the illusion of their emotions which colours and deforms shapes.

Sorel regarded emotion and passion in an ambivalent manner, sometimes seeing it as the logical recognition of the mysterious, but sometimes as a blind which misleads men about reality and causes them to think in an artificial fashion. In the latter case, Hulme pictured the emphasis upon emotion as a form of exhilaration, as if the receiver had been breathing rare air. This is a particular quality of the romantic philosophy. In order to maintain his existence the romantic had to go on emphasizing the "new" and "believing that something wonderful and extraordinary can and is about to happen to man."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, even if the emotion or passion was distorted in some fashion, it still might be strong enough to lead men in a new direction. For example, patriotism was "un élément sentimental, irrationnel, une fiction. Mais tout le monde est d'accord pour reconnaître l'importance considérable de cette fiction."⁵⁶

Images must not only recognize the importance of

emotion and poetry, but they must recognize that man belongs to the collective, and is not an individual. Even in an historical sense man can not say that he is an individual or solitary because of the weight of history. He is never free of his past, or of the future that does not yet exist. This lack of individuality is expressed through the medium of his language, and his images. "Language, being a communal apparatus, only conveys that part of the emotion which is common to all of us."⁵⁷

If language is not the creation of the individual, then neither is the image. For Sorel, the image, which supplied those sentiments and concepts that language could not, had to be based in a specific group or bund (although it might reach beyond the bund), and it had to be rooted in the artificial world. At a fundamental level, he believed that man is not able to think in a vacuum, and that human ideas and images are related to observations of the natural world. Sorel preferred to use technical, mechanical, and practical figures of speech, perhaps partly because this was the world with which he was familiar, but also because Marx had shown the importance of tools and of the workers in the revolutionary transformation of society. Even in historical studies the level of production and plastic arts of a culture would give evidence as to what level the society had reached in its complexity and variety of language, since "l'acte doit avoir précédé le discours."⁵⁸

S'il existe quelque chose de social, par excellence, dans l'activité humaine, c'est la machine; elle est plus sociale que le langage lui-même.⁵⁹

J'ai toujours parlé de mécanismes, parce que les mécanismes fournissent des exemples beaucoup plus saisissables que toute autre oeuvre humaine.⁶⁰

. . . je crois qu'il conviendrait de dire en joignant ces vues à celle de Marx et de Bergson, que l'intelligence est tendue sur un arc qui va de la technologie au langage.⁶¹

Notre civilisation moderne repose sur une économie dont la technique est en continuelle révolution, tandis que les techniques des âges intérieurs étaient conservatrices . . . on ne saurait être trop reconnaissant à l'auteur de l'Évolution créatrice d'avoir tenté de faire comprendre à nos contemporains la nécessité d'adapter leur manière de penser aux conditions révolutionnaires de leur vie.⁶²

Despite the importance he attached to technological images Sorel strongly objected to the contemporary fashion which involved the use of scientific images or figures of speech in relationship to men, when the original reason for these figures of speech was usually ignored. For example, technically, steam engines were more efficient in proportion to their increased size, but socialists seemed to believe that the organizations of men would also grow in efficiency with size, yet this supposition had no basis in fact. The application of such images usually resulted in misjudgements and errors, especially in those fields where relationships were rather vague, such as in psychology.

iv. The Myth

Sorel's support of images and symbols in reaction to the ineffectiveness of language was to reach its height in his doctrine of the myth, the device that inspired the intrinsic power of the human will. His myth has been severely criticized by many historians for its imprecision and inaccuracy, both politically and sociologically. Often the critics have applied the most rigorous of linguistic standards, described it as little more than Le Bon's "collective hallucinations"⁶³ of the masses, or else they have rather briskly dismissed it from further consideration, except insofar as it influenced fascists like Mussolini. Stuart Hughes, one of the most generous viewers of the myth, said that Sorel's attempt to combine the changing character of social phenomena with a recognition of non-logical motivation was "an extraordinary, an almost unique ambition in a social theorist, yet in the end he did not know what to do with it."⁶⁴

The problem with most of the critiques of the myth, like that of Hughes, is that they have ignored the emphasis Sorel placed upon the poetic quality, its mysterious symbolism, and its vitality. It is not a sociological definition with strict limitations, but an all-embracing world view. From his earliest writings Sorel insisted that history, even in revolutions, did not move because of economic reasons, and that no political

or social change could occur without the force of an idea behind it. In order to suppress other forces, men needed convictions which dominated their whole consciousness to the exclusion of conscious thought. The idea or myth must be as deep in men as moral decisions, and as instantaneous.

The myth is an anonymous fiction, a movement of the masses, not a coherent, logical description of a physical world. It is not part of the world of natural science, but rather of that area of life where illusions, mystery, and passions reign. It is neither true nor false, logical nor rational. Indeed, none of its suppositions can be tested. One example that Sorel uses is the stigmata of Francis of Assisi which had an enormous effect upon the Middle Ages, although they may not have occurred.

The essential core of the myth rested in the necessity for men to sometimes believe in the unbelievable. "D'après une loi de notre nature, nous voulons avoir quelque chose d'indémontrable à croire. Le Credo quia absurdum appartient à toutes les époques et à toutes les civilisations."⁶⁵ The function of the myth is to rouse men to action, to aid them in the ceaseless war against decadence. This was a key question for Sorel. What was it that motivated men and created historical forces? "Without leaving the present, without reasoning about . . . (the) future, which seems forever condemned to

escape our reason, we should be unable to act at all."⁶⁶ Thus the myth can describe the motivations of men, and provide a link between words and action. The myth only becomes true if realized by action, and led by heroism and a search for the sublime.

One of Sorel's most controversial ideas about the myth was that Marxism was also a mythology. Marx, he said, had never developed a succinct theory of everyday action because of the backwardness of the working class movement at that time, because he was still under the influence of models from the French Revolution, and because he did not recognize that "we hardly ever take action except when propelled by memories often more vivid in our mind than immediate reality."⁶⁷ What the myth could do was ensure that the proletariat had a clear consciousness of its existence as an indivisible class, that it had enough strength to enter the class struggle, and that it was ready to reverse the traditional ideological system. "Aucune grande révolution n'a pu se produire sans des illusions pressantes et nombreuses."⁶⁸ If Marx had not recognized that his vision of the final catastrophe was in the nature of a social myth it was because he was blinded by his passion.

The myth is a collective idea which can neither be created nor destroyed by individuals. It sees the world as a whole, which must be accepted in its totality,

and it cannot be broken down into separate parts. "We have a vivid sketch that gives a clear idea of the change; but it is not possible to discuss details as historically verifiable facts."⁶⁹ In a sense it is propaganda, the sort to be found in governments that attempt to excite patriotic fervour. Myths only last a limited time, changing as social, national, and economic situations change.

The myth cannot be separated from the ideas of passion, and from a leap of faith. Why the myth is superior to intelligence is because the logical, rational side of the mind only described what actually existed, while the myth was able to change that which exists. Also, it adds an intensity to life, coloured with emotion and feelings of passion which language could never describe. According to Sorel, the myth also had an heroic character, certainly among the elite who led it.

However, the employment of a myth could not be separated from a long period of preparation, since the only way in which man could create a feeling or emotion was to use it each time that the occasion presented it. This was why it was necessary to begin immediately to prepare for the proletarian revolution or specifically the general strike. Furthermore, those myths which had some basis in tangible facts were more likely to be believed. For example, since the French Revolution it was easier to

believe in the efficacy of force than in other eras.

In the myth Sorel attempted to apply Bergson's ideas of duration, and of the image in philosophy to social, political, and economic phenomena. These social myths allowed the attainment of continuous, moving reality. Within their limits, men could act with the complete confidence of faith, and obtain some measure of freedom. Sorel believed that the myth had appeared as early as ancient Greece, as a method of explaining ideas which scientific knowledge could not do. Examples of historical myths were those of primitive Christianity, the Reformation, the French Revolution and the followers of Mazzini. The event which was to confirm the Sorelian myth was the Bolshevik Revolution. Lenin proved that "rien ne se fait, en grande politique, si l'on ne crée par une sorte de sentiment supérieur de lui-même chez un peuple, une sorte de sentiment en quelque sorte religieux, qui va jusqu'au sacrifice en faveur de l'Idée."⁷⁰ Unlike ideology for Marx, myths would not disappear after the proletarian revolution. Sorel was far more optimistic politically than Robert Michels, because Sorel believed that myths actually had changed history, even if only in brief moments of glory. Michels thought, on the contrary, that it was extremely difficult to stir the masses or to make profound modifications in their thought and that no matter how energetic or vigorous a movement, it was incapable of making any profound or

permanent changes.⁷¹ Probably the majority of critics would agree with Michels and yet Sorel's myth was obviously a very valuable attempt to describe the motivations of men in history without the limitations of language. Sorel's myth was an expression of faith by a bund in a form that could transcend time and movement, and was therefore, an expression of many of the ideas that were to be found in the irrationalist climate of opinion.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

¹Jack J. Roth, The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p.276.

²See Giorgia Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene, Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp.359-363.

³Isaiah Berlin, Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976), p.42.

⁴Vico, quoted in Berlin, p.42.

⁵Le Système Historique de Renan, p.206.

⁶According to Sorel, both law and language, in an analogy to architecture, were constructed on building procedures. Gradually the rules and procedures became hardened and then philosophy intervened to proclaim that these rules were an illustration of the original purpose.

⁷La Ruine du Monde Antique, p.124.

⁸Ibid., p.125, Sorel's emphasis.

⁹D'Aristote à Marx, p.124.

¹⁰Ibid., p.118.

¹¹An example that Sorel uses is Jaurès' use of the words "pure", "precise", and "profound". The Illusions of Progress, p.99, fn.24.

¹²Reflections on Violence, p.210.

¹³The Illusions of Progress, p.39.

¹⁴Edouard Berth, Les Méfaits des Intellectuels (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1914), p.148.

- ¹⁵ Formes et Essence du socialisme, p.XXI, fn.1.
- ¹⁶ Reflections on Violence, p.114.
- ¹⁷ Formes et Essence du socialisme, p.VII.
- ¹⁸ "Les formules abstraites donnent naissance aux contresens les plus paradoxaux, et nous devons les éviter, autant que possible, dans tous les écrits destinées à devenir populaires," D'Aristote à Marx, p.71.
- ¹⁹ De l'Eglise et de l'Etat, p.22.
- ²⁰ Introduction à l'economie moderne, p.viii.
- ²¹ Le Procès de Socrate, p.178.
- ²² Robert Michels, Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy (New York: Free Press, 1962), p.98.
- ²³ An example was the use of Joan of Arc as an example of inspiration, a story which had no meaning for the workers.
- ²⁴ D'Aristote à Marx, p.253.
- ²⁵ Introduction à l'economie moderne, p.390.
- ²⁶ Halevy, p.202.
- ²⁷ Kolakowski, p.65.
- ²⁸ Meisel, p.47.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Rennes, p.9.
- ³⁰ La Ruine du Monde Antique, p.xix.
- ³¹ The Polish critic, Kolakowski, stating that Sorel "did not exert control over his talent" compared Sorel to another Polish writer, S. Brzozowski, who also had a style "that imitated creative evolution in Bergson's sense: it develops, propelled by a certain tendency, but with a predetermined goal." Kolakowski, p.66.

³²The Illusions of Progress, p.xi.

³³Halévy, p.102.

³⁴Variot, p.213.

³⁵Variot, p.172.

³⁶Jones, p.206. Variot described Sorel in almost the same manner, when he watched Sorel surveying an Impressionist painting or listening to a lecture by Bergson. "Il semble poursuivre une idée. Il a l'air d'avoir oublié l'usage de la parole." Variot, p.209.

³⁷Quote by the Belgian socialist Vandervelde in Barbara Tuchman, The Proud Tower (London: The Macmillan Co., 1966), p.435.

³⁸Variot, p.153.

³⁹Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat, p.58.

⁴⁰Glenn Hughes, Imagism and the Imagists: A Study in Modern Poetry (New York: Humanities Press, 1960), p.28.

⁴¹Hulme, Notes on Language and Style, in Michael Roberts T. E. Hulme (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1938), p.285.

⁴²The Decomposition of Marxism, p.251.

⁴³Reflections on Violence, p.122.

⁴⁴Hulme, Lecture on Modern Poetry, Roberts, p.267.

⁴⁵Les Méfaits des Intellectuels, p.272.

⁴⁶Reflections on Violence, p.230.

⁴⁷Sorel noted that the early Christians frequently thought in this fashion, as, for example, in their opposition of a religious life to a worldly life. "On

persistait à faire ce qu'on avait toujours fait, et l'habitude empêchait de remarquer des anomalies de langage dont nous sommes aujourd'hui choqués." La Ruine du Monde Antique, p.64.

⁴⁸The Illusions of Progress, p.23.

⁴⁹Ibid., p.23.

⁵⁰Quotation by Newman from Grammar of Assent, quoted by Sorel in Reflections on Violence, p.29.

⁵¹Benedetto Croce, The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico, translated by R. G. Collingwood (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913), p.5.

⁵²Humphrey, p.220.

⁵³D'Aristote à Marx, p.166.

⁵⁴La Ruine du Monde Antique, p.52.

⁵⁵Hulme, A Tory Philosophy, Jones, p.192.

⁵⁶La Ruine du Monde Antique, p.109.

⁵⁷Speculations, p.158.

⁵⁸La Système Historique de Renan, p.204.

⁵⁹D'Aristote à Marx, p.201.

⁶⁰Ibid., p.210.

⁶¹De l'utilité du Pragmatisme, p.396.

⁶²Ibid., p.415.

⁶³A. James Gregor, The Ideology of Fascism: The Rationale of Totalitarianism (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p.67.

⁶⁴Stuart Hughes, p.173.

⁶⁵Le Procès de Socrate, p.146.

⁶⁶Reflections on Violence, p.124.

⁶⁷The Decomposition of Marxism, p.242. Sorel's emphasis.

⁶⁸Preface by Sorel to Antonio Labriola, Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire (Paris: Giard et Brière, 1897), p.11.

⁶⁹The Decomposition of Marxism, p.248.

⁷⁰Variot, p.81.

⁷¹Michels, p.355. The most detailed and intelligent analysis of the myth has been made by Jules Monnerot, who regarded Sorel's myth with great respect.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Although Georges Sorel has been classified in a number of fashions, according to his political, social, or moral philosophies, as demonstrated in the historiography surveyed in Chapter I, his work cannot be understood without some reference to the fundamental importance he attached to the relationship between men and their actions. Men often explained their conduct or thoughts with specific reasons, but ignored the fact that their theories and actions were "fréquemment déterminés par des tendances qui échappent à notre critique."¹ Since hidden motives were just as powerful as the motives that were openly recognized, and yet were seldom acknowledged, it was necessary to examine them in detail. Sorel believed that some of the major motivating forces of men could not be described by language alone, and that, in fact, language was an inadequate means of describing more than a limited area of reality. In his attack on language, he was travelling in a parallel direction to the structuralists, although his theories were never clearly expressed or, outside of the concept of the myth, reached much sophistication.

At the basis of all his work was a search for la connaissance, for those elements of life of which man had any certainty. Nature, man's character, the future, even language, were bewildering and perplexing. According to Sorel, the beliefs that men could hold with confidence were far more limited than many philosophers declared. Furthermore, it was difficult to describe ideas, emotions, or beliefs in rational, logical language, that held the same meaning for all men.

Sorel was part of the "momentous historic shift in the nature of perception which finally crystallized in the early twentieth century The 'new' perception involved the realization that despite appearances to the contrary the world does not consist of independently existing objects, whose concrete features can be perceived clearly and individually, and whose nature can be classified accordingly."² In dividing the world into two realms of natural nature, which could never be understood by man, and a limited area of artificial nature, where scientific laws were valid, Sorel acknowledged the inability of language to construct a unified, logical, coherent system of thought which had an existence distinct from man. It was essential to recognize "l'influence énorme exercée par l'organisme expressif de la science, la langue."³ "A wholly objective perception of individual entities is therefore not possible: any

observer is bound to create something of what he observes."⁴ Man never develops as an isolated being because "le milieu est fabriqué, travaillé, continuellement épuré par son activité et toute science de l'homme qui néglige ce milieu est une anthropologie fantastique."⁵ Since in order to change society, not only must the political apparatus be altered, but also "l'organisme vivant"⁶ which included language, it was necessary to accept the limitations of language. Rationalist language was only one method by which to review reality, since it was inadequate either to motivate men in a search for the sublime and the heroic, or to describe the nebulous realm of the intuitional and the mystical. The whole was breaking down into parts, and, for Sorel, this meant also the destruction of the concept of one unified language.

In his linguistic theories Sorel advocated the use of the image and the myth as the most valuable means of grasping the uncertain, obscure, spontaneous, passionate, and revolutionary world of men. Men must move from the utopian to the practical, from imagination to intelligence, from the romantic to the legal, from the absolute to the relative, from simplicity to complexity.⁷ Since Sorel's ideas on language remained in an incoherent form, as did many of his other ideas, they can often be more readily understood through the analysis of T. E. Hulme. In his attack on bourgeois "formulas" and rhetoric, on "big

words and common phrases without meaning,"⁸ and on precise, comprehensive closed systems of thought he envisaged the same solution as Hulme.

. . . there are, roughly speaking, two methods of communication, a direct, and a conventional language. The direct language is poetry, it is direct because it deals in images. The indirect language is prose, because it uses images that have died and become figures of speech.

The difference between the two is, roughly, this: that while one arrests your mind all the time with a picture, the other allows the mind to run along with the least possible effort to a conclusion.⁹

In a sense, Sorel's concept of language might be described in images itself, that of building materials, of bricks and blocks. The bricks belong to artificial nature, and include scientific theories. They can grasp as much of reality as man can comprehend, and can then be built into a solid, rational, precise wall of knowledge, one brick upon the other. Usually, according to Sorel, they had their origins in technology and machines, an area of la connaissance where progress existed.

Blocks, on the other hand, existed in the dark, unknown world where man groped blindly, searching with difficulty not simply for technical knowledge, but for the sublime and the heroic. The darkness was decadence, which stretched all around him and might overwhelm him at any time. Once grasped, blocks had sharp, distinct outlines, like the vivid picture of the myth that inspired revolutions.

The outlines of the blocks were defined by scission, for each block was entirely separate from the others. But blocks were not connected to others in a system of knowledge, and once lost, were never regained, since they formed "an indivisible whole."¹⁰

Both Sorel and Hulme were extremely visual thinkers, and their concepts of images and myths become much clearer when this visual characteristic is remembered. Language, in a traditional sense, was thought to be objective, but the myth and the image are not, for they can only be understood from the inside, just as a picture can only be understood by the viewer, not by words describing it. Thus a myth is "a vivid sketch that gives a clear idea of the change."¹¹ Thus the general strike was:

the myth in which Socialism is wholly comprised, i.e., 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. Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, deepest, and most moving sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups them all in a co-ordinated picture, and by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum of intensity; appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness. We thus obtain that intuition of Socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness--and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously.¹²

The myth is like the pictures formed in a dream just as the early Christians "si souvent parlé comme des rêveurs,

sans tenir compte des conditions réelles de la vie."¹³

Myths were part of the "unconsciousness" of man (a word Sorel did not use, but fully understood), partially held together by the traditions, legends, and emotion of a group.

. . . il y a à côté de l'outillage linguistique tout un ensemble de conditions indéfinissables qui poussent la pensée dans des directions que ne peuvent toujours prévoir les traducteurs; ces conditions constituent un système de logique spécial à chaque peuple.¹⁴

Myths are formed by emotion, by passion and by poetry. "L'homme, plus qu'on ne le croit, veut s'attacher à l'idéal d'une espérance."¹⁵ However, they also possessed the qualities found in art, such as a hardness, evidence of a struggle towards the sublime, and distinct aspects which can never be analyzed, especially from the outside.

Sorel's thought itself, as Daniel Halévy pointed out in 1909, was akin to that of a poet with "son monde intérieur, si riche de pensées véhémentes et lyriques."¹⁶ Therefore, rather than confining Sorel to a specific political or social label, it is probably just as valid to view his thought more in relationship to the imagistic, intuitionist world of the poet than the objective one of the political commentator. It is very rare to find a man with the temperament of Sorel writing philosophy, as it was with Hulme.¹⁷ However, it is even rarer to find a philosopher who attempted to apply the concept of the myth

directly to the politics of his day.

Sorel's failure as a political theorist to gain much popularity can be attributed, to a certain extent, to this amalgamation of political and poetic thought. Beyond recognizing the mythology of the Nazi party, few historians have been prepared to admit the existence of a myth in their own society, or to recognize consciously that social and political ideologies can have a mythical function. Furthermore, the link between politics and other fields, such as that of anthropology or literature, has declined since Sorel's era, with a natural deterioration of any interest in applying poetic methods to political analysis. Sorel, like other Frenchmen of his generation, made an attempt to break away from a rigorous, classical tradition to the recognition of a dynamic, poetic intelligence, but this attempt failed. Nevertheless, his theory that there are no historical or natural absolutes, and no absolutes in language either, place him in the historical tradition of philosophers such as Vico.

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

- ¹Labriola, p.xxxvii.
- ²Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1977), p.17.
- ³D'Aristote à Marx, p.193.
- ⁴Hawkes, p.17.
- ⁵D'Aristote à Marx, p.193.
- ⁶Histoire des Bourses du Travail, p.xlii.
- ⁷The Decomposition of Marxism, p.221.
- ⁸Roberts, p.300.
- ⁹Ibid., p.268.
- ¹⁰The Decomposition of Marxism, p.248.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Reflections on Violence, p.127.
- ¹³Formes et Essence du socialisme, p.xiii.
- ¹⁴Le Système Historique de Renan, p.202.
- ¹⁵Variot, p.82.
- ¹⁶Halévy, p.62.
- ¹⁷See Roberts, p.119.

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