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AUTHOR	Tynan Avril
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DEMYTHOLOGIZING DE GAULLE: HISTORY AS MYTH AND MYTH AS HERMENEUTIC IN FRANCE AFTER VICHY AND ALGERIAN INDEPENDENCE

Writing and Rewriting History

From the 1960s, the works of Roland Barthes, Paul Veyne, Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur problematized the assumed dichotomy between history and fiction. They challenged the belief that accounts of the past were the objective accumulation of documentary facts procured through archival records and historical analysis and delivered by impartial non-actors. A historical account, it was argued, was a narrative representation of the past in that it too ‘sorts, simplifies, organizes’¹ the seemingly anarchic occurrences of a period of time into a coherent account that privileges the telling of certain events, persons and places while downplaying, overlooking, or ignoring – or being ignorant of – other events, persons and places. As Veyne, in *Writing History: An Essay on Epistemology* wrote: ‘The historian can dwell for ten pages on one day and pass over ten years in two lines; the reader will trust him, as he trusts a good novelist, and will presume that those ten years are uneventful’.² History, then, like the novel, is subjective: the subject(s) is chosen freely by the historian, the perspective privileged by the conclusion, and the events sequentially organized in such a way as to tie one moment of the past to other spaces, times and events that preceded it or proceeded from it. Of course, these historiographical approaches do not mean to suggest that history be conflated with fiction – the historian must respect and acknowledge quantitative facts of the past while the novelist may invent or invert the ‘facts’ in the pursuit of interest

¹ Paul Veyne, *Writing History: An Essay on Epistemology* [1971], trans. by Mina Moore-Rinvulcri (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), p. 4.

² Veyne, *Writing History*, pp. 17–18.

and entertainment – but rather that fiction may ‘complement, rather than undermine’ the deterministic field of quantitative history.³

History, like fiction, is a narrative interpretation of events, and its writing or telling of the past is always mediated from a present position. This situation allows at once for a chronologically distanced confrontation with the past that may enable new objectivities to arise, but also suffers from inconsistencies, errors and misinterpretations that – willingly or unwillingly – interfere with historical epistemology. As Veyne has suggested, writing and reading history may ‘not only leave us in ignorance of many things, but [may] also leave us ignorant of the fact that we are ignorant’.⁴ In the hermeneutic tradition, to which and from which White’s narratological historiography owes a great debt, this potential ignorance can be ascribed both to the positioning of the actors in the past and to the positioning of the historian in the present. The quantitative facts of the past are not ‘found’, as White was fond of saying, but are embedded within a narrative framework that influences not only their subsequent representation by the historian, but the historian’s reception of the events as they are constructed within documentary evidence.⁵

Today, therefore, our knowledge of what we understand as history comes to us through manifold interpretative structures: what we perceive as a singular past event reaches us through the witnesses’ interpretation of an event into documentary evidence, the historian’s interpretation of objectively comparative material into historiographical narrative, and finally the contemporary reader’s interpretation of the historical narrative evidence. At each level, interpretation is already structured through social, cultural and historical

³ Hayden White, ‘The History Fiction Divide’, *Holocaust Studies* 20:1–2 (2014), 17–34 (p. 18).

⁴ Veyne, *Writing History*, p. 13.

⁵ Hayden White, ‘The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’, *History and Theory* 23: 1 (1984), 1–33.

frameworks that nuance the perception and understanding of events, their impact and significance, and how they can and should be told. The past, therefore, is better understood as what Reinhart Koselleck called the ‘present past’,⁶ a transitory and changeable mediation of particular events, times and spaces. As Veyne has argued, an event cannot be ‘grasped directly and fully; it is always grasped incompletely and laterally’⁷ through traces – including semiotic and hegemonic ones – that persist in the present.⁸ From our perspective today, the past is thus never over; indeed, in some ways, its narration may not yet even have begun. The narratological turn in historical discourse raised concerns over the notions of completion, exhaustion and conclusion: if a historical event, persisting in traces and impressions in the present, could not be said to have reached an endpoint, then from a narrative perspective it was still active and subject to revival through retelling.

This article espouses a literary hermeneutics that privileges the ongoing interpretation of the past in the present and for the future. In the case of a mythologization of history – as is often discussed in the context of Charles de Gaulle’s reunification of France in the post-Occupation era – the various ‘turns’⁹ that influenced twentieth-century Western thought and practice and challenged the hegemony of epistemology are understood in the context of interpretative attempts at demythologization. Reading Michel Déon’s *Les Poneys sauvages*¹⁰ – published originally in 1970 and republished in 2010 – through the lens of a present past animates the now widely acknowledged myth of resistancialism during the Second World

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* [1979], transl. by Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1985), p. 272.

⁷ Veyne, *Writing History*, p. 4.

⁸ See Veyne, *Writing History*, p. 24.

⁹ For an overview of the development of different ‘turns’ and ‘re-turns’ in historical writing, including the linguistic, the narrative, the ethical, the aesthetic, the cultural and the new empiricist re-turn, see Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2018), pp. 1-8.

¹⁰ Michel Déon, *Les Poneys sauvages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970/2010). Hereafter, all quotations appear directly in the text and come from the later edition unless specified.

War, but also ongoing Gaullist mythologies of what will be referred to as ‘victorious defeat’ in the dénouement of the Algerian war. Déon’s demythologizing of dominant post-war discourses demonstrates a counterpoint to the presentation of a unanimous and united France even in the immediate post-war years by opening up spaces of ambiguity and incompleteness. At the same time, his demythologization becomes in itself an interpretative act; a counter- or re-mythologization. Ultimately, this interpretative conflict opens up historical narrative to experiential subjectivity and encourages the reader to examine the present as much as the past.

Myth and Memory: De Gaulle and the *Mythe Résistancialiste*

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes’s collection of essays on the language of cultural phenomena, he explicates myth as a distortion of Saussurian semiotics that perverts the accepted coupling of signifier and signified in the production of a sign, transforming the sign back into the second-order signifier of a metalinguistic sign.¹¹ Reorganizing the linguistic sign as such that a mythological signified assumes intrinsic and unquestioned meaning, myth presents socially constructed meanings and understandings as naturally occurring states in the world. As ‘un système de communication’ rather than ‘un objet, un concept, ou une idée’ in itself,¹² myth becomes an ideological tool for neutralizing and naturalizing particular worldviews but cannot be held accountable for *what* it communicates. Because it simultaneously evacuates and fulfils the meaning of the sign, myth presents the signifier as inherently meaningful, presenting arbitrary signification as invariable and incontrovertible truth.¹³ ‘Le mythe’, argued Barthes, ‘n’est ni un mensonge ni un aveu: c’est une inflexion’¹⁴ and, as such, it does

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), pp. 187–8.

¹² Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 181.

¹³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 217.

¹⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 202.

not hide or reveal any such truth, but distorts the way events, concepts and facts are communicated and thus understood. In post-Second World War France, myth became a powerful tool in the reunification of an ideologically and geographically divided nation, nourishing a culture of distortion and neutralization that could ‘faire passer’ the memory of events and experiences, transforming history into nature.¹⁵

The primary myth of the post-Second World War period in France has become synonymous with Gaullist rhetoric and the question of resistancialism.¹⁶ Despite his geographical distance from France during the Second World War,¹⁷ de Gaulle and his *France libre* government-in-exile became a key figurehead of the anti-German campaign¹⁸ and when Paris was eventually liberated, on 25 August 1944, he triumphantly declared the outcome as the result of a combined national effort:

Paris! Paris outragé! Paris brisé! Paris martyrisé! mais Paris libéré! libéré par lui-même, libéré par son peuple avec le concours des armées de la France, avec l’appui et le concours de la France tout entière, de la France qui se bat, de la seule France, de la vraie France, de la France éternelle. [...] Vive la France!¹⁹

This speech represented the first step in the reunification and reidentification of the country under an ideological myth that minimized the impact and influence of the Vichy regime and

¹⁵ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 202.

¹⁶ This neologism comes from Henry Rousso, who uses it in *Le Syndrome de Vichy: de 1944 à nos jours* [1987], 2nd edn (Paris: Seuil, 1990) in reference to the constructed image of a heroic and defiant France.

¹⁷ Forced into exile in 1940 in the wake of the Nazi occupation, de Gaulle spent most of the war years in London, from where he coordinated the *France libre* resistance effort.

¹⁸ In Julian Jackson’s biography of de Gaulle (*A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle* (London: Penguin, 2018), *British Library Legal Depository*), he attributes much of this successful portrayal to the inadvertent efforts of Pétain’s Vichy government, which attempted to vilify de Gaulle and in effect created an idol for anti-Vichy supporters.

¹⁹ De Gaulle, cited in Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, p. 30.

portrayed exaggerated adherence to resistance efforts – both concrete activities and intangible sentiments – as unanimous and unwavering. Individual memory was subsumed under the heroic gloss of a collective memory of national resistance.

Seen through the lens of Henry Rousso's canonical work on the *syndrome de Vichy*, this Gaullist myth of national resistance persisted until the 1970s, when a series of events – the generational unrest of *mai '68*, the death of de Gaulle in 1970, the release of Marcel Ophüls's film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* in 1971, and the publication of American historian Robert Paxton's *La France de Vichy* in 1973 – began to expose the distortions imposed by the Gaullist myth of national resistance. At the height of this rebellion, additional cinematic and literary works of the *mode rétro*, such as Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) and Patrick Modiano's *La Place de l'étoile* (1968), contributed towards debunking the national myth, casting doubt over the uniformity of anti-German sentiment during the war years and highlighting the individuality of experience and memory.²⁰ The return of the repressed through what Rousso refers to as the 'miroir brisé' in the chronological progression of the Vichy syndrome exposed the myth of resistancialism for what it was: a convenient distortion of historical signification that had moulded to the political, social and economic needs of the

²⁰ That the *mode rétro* and its attendant critique of the Vichy years suddenly sprang up in post-Gaullist France overlooks the abundance of material in the immediate post-war years that attempts to convey alternative interpretations of the Occupation. As Margaret Attack writes, 'the Gaullist/Communist myth was not at all in monolithic domination during the intervening decades' and the desire to delay interpretations of these counter-narratives rests on a Freudian conceptualization of latency in traumatic return that Rousso's framework advocates. Attack, 'L'Armée des ombres and *Le Chagrin et la pitié*: Reconfigurations of Law, Legalities and the State in Post-1968 France', in *European Memories of the Second World War*, ed. by Helmut Peitsch, Charles Burdett and Claire Gorrara (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 1999) pp. 160–74 (p. 163). See also Alan Morris, *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed: Writers and the Mode Rétro in Post-Gaullist France* (New York: Berg, 1992). Although Morris' analysis of the *mode rétro* firmly reflects Rousso's schematic timeline of the Vichy syndrome, he outlines notable detractions and challenges to the myth of a *France résistante* in the intervening years (pp. 7–41).

nation. As a hermeneutic, the myth of resistancialism influenced the perception and production of national historiography, working not only retrospectively in the interpretation of the historical events, but prospectively, influencing the way people understood the world around them and anticipated the future. As Barthes put it, ‘le lecteur *vit* le mythe à la façon d’une histoire à la fois vraie et irréaliste’.²¹ The Gaullist myth of resistancialism would therefore come to play a significant role in the following years and would be resurrected in force during the ensuing *guerre franco-française*: the Algerian War of Independence.

The Return of Myth: The Algerian War of Independence

The Algerian War of Independence raged from 1954 to 1962 and it continues to spark heated debates, particularly concerning the uses of torture and contentions over free economic movement between the two countries. As a colony of France, Algeria was considered a department rather than a separate country and the euphemistic phrase ‘opérations de sécurité et de maintien de l’ordre’ was only officially replaced by ‘war’ in 1999. Although the war began as coordinated terrorist uprisings of the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*), it descended into a disastrous war of attrition that gradually alienated international support and deeply divided national opinion. The hegemonic French narrative of the war continues to downplay acts of violence – including rape, torture and the murder of civilians – suggesting that any such foul play was an aberration, committed only by an unrepentant minority. If official memory has been slow to accept the gruesome realities of the war, however, often reiterating that crimes were committed on both sides,²² cultural memory has largely accepted

²¹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 202, emphasis mine.

²² See Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l’oubli* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991). In September 2018, President Emmanuel Macron became the first president to admit the systematic use of torture during the war.

the unsavoury character of the campaign and helped to expose French atrocities.²³ Yet, while the *mode rétro* sought to demythologize the narrative of resistancialism during the Second World War, the heritage of the Gaullist myth in an ideological and naturalizing narrative of the Algerian war is rarely attended to in cultural or historical memory.²⁴

In Julian Jackson's biography of de Gaulle, he reflects upon the president's mythologization of the Algerian war as a necessary extension of the political and sociocultural frameworks that motivated and enabled his return to the Élysée. When de Gaulle resumed presidency in 1958, France was on the verge of civil war. Dissolving what remained of the troubled Fourth Republic, de Gaulle established the Fifth Republic and promised to find a solution to the Algerian question that would avoid both integration and independence and allow for the maintenance of French economic and geopolitical interests in the area – primarily access to the Sahara. Although de Gaulle eventually granted Algerian independence, signing the Évian accords in March 1962 and bringing an end to the civil unrest, his policies and aspirations during the four years of conflict were turbulent and at times inconsistent, even duplicitous. As Jackson elaborates:

De Gaulle's 'granting' of Algerian independence, while avoiding civil war in France, is often counted as one of his greatest achievements. This judgement needs to be qualified. He did not 'grant' independence: it was wrested from him. And he only

²³ A huge number of contemporary books and films deal with the darker side of the war, including Gillo Pontecorvo's *La Bataille d'Alger* (1965) – predating even Ophüls's *Le Chagrin et la pitié* – Rachid Bouchareb's controversial 2010 film *Hors-la-loi* and Didier Daeninckx's 1983 detective novel *Meurtres pour mémoire*.

²⁴ Anne Donadey proposes a convincing model of 'the Algeria syndrome' along the same lines as Rousso's Vichy syndrome in "'Une Certaine Idée de la France": The Algeria Syndrome and Struggles over "French" Identity', in *Identity Papers: Contested Nationhood in Twentieth-Century France*, ed. by Steven Ungar and Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 215–32. See also Maud Anne Bracke, 'From Politics to Nostalgia: The Transformation of War Memories in France during the 1960s-1970s', *European History Quarterly* 41:1 (2011), 5–24.

partially avoided civil war. The truth is that the FLN had won independence by fighting and by mobilizing international support. Although de Gaulle gradually resigned himself to this outcome, he did so reluctantly – and by the end he had salvaged nothing of his original expectations. [...] De Gaulle’s achievement, then, was less to have ‘granted’ independence than to have persuaded people that that is what he had done; to make them believe that he had controlled the process; and to create a compelling narrative that explained France’s disengagement from Algeria and turned it into a victory rather than a defeat.²⁵

Not only had de Gaulle not granted independence to Algeria in the way that he convinced the French people he had, but in abandoning *l’Algérie française* he had also betrayed the million or so *pieds-noirs* – European settlers in Algeria – the French army and the political right, as well as the *harkis* – Algerians who had fought for the French.²⁶

Once again, de Gaulle constructed a myth that transformed history into nature: what mattered was the symbolic narrative of an inevitable outcome that would restore national unity to a country that had – for supporters of *Algérie française* in particular – been severed in two. Through this myth of ‘victorious defeat’, the narrative of events in Algeria was distorted, not only in the ways most commonly acknowledged – the refusal to recognize uses

²⁵ Jackson, *A Certain Idea of France*, np. See also Benjamin Stora, *Le mystère De Gaulle: son choix pour l’Algérie* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2009); Michel Winock, ‘De Gaulle and the Algerian Crisis 1958-1962’, in *De Gaulle and Twentieth-Century France*, ed. By Hugh Gough and John Horne (London and New York: Edward Arnold, 1994), pp. 71–82. Winock suggests that de Gaulle’s management of Algerian decolonization contributed to his ‘legitimization of a new regime’ and the ‘political and constitutional renewal of France itself’ (p. 82).

²⁶ While the *pieds-noirs* were allowed to return to France, *harki* attempts to seek refuge in France after hostilities had ended were largely rejected, leaving most to almost certain retribution and death at the hands of former FLN soldiers.

of torture in Algeria, although this was a necessary by-product of the myth²⁷ – but in the narrativization of Algerian independence as an established and agreed-upon inevitability. Placing blame on the Fourth Republic for allowing the situation in Algeria to reach breaking point and transforming his own discourse of successful independence into a retrospective programme for permanent ceasefire, de Gaulle’s mythologization of the Algerian war complicates present day attempts to come to terms with the past, and especially with the true realities of violence during the war. The Fifth Republic, after all, is the reigning political regime in France; current order is built upon a founding Gaullist myth of post-Occupation national identity.

Yet, cultural memory has made some attempts to demythologize de Gaulle’s retrospective staging of the Algerian war in line with the heritage of resistancialism in French national identity. As an ardent anti-Gaullist, Michel Déon’s entire œuvre offers a counterpoint and challenge to the dominant – and often mythologized – discourses that monopolize both post-Second World War and post-Algerian independence era France, including the role and responsibility of de Gaulle and the naturalization of historical incidence.²⁸ In *Les Poneys sauvages*, Déon attempts to debunk the Gaullist myth of ‘victorious defeat’ in Algeria by highlighting the inadequacies of self-determination policies in the post-war era and drawing on the subjectivity of the historical record. The novel’s further revision and republication in 2010 draws attention to the ‘present past’ of historical discourses and motions towards the need for ongoing interpretation through the intersections and intertwinements of myth and counter-myth.

²⁷ By downplaying the war effort and presenting independence as an inevitability, narratives of torture *must* be presented as aberrations, since independence was always expected.

²⁸ Déon’s most clearly politically motivated works, however, are *Les Poneys sauvages* and *La Carotte et le Bâton* (1983). See Thierry Laurent, *Michel Déon: Écrivain engagé ou désengagé?* (Paris: Éditions des Écrivains, 1999).

Michel Déon's *Les Poneys sauvages*: A Narrative Counter-Myth

Born Édouard Michel in 1919 in Paris, Michel Déon spent much of his childhood in Nice and Monaco, returning to Paris after the death of his father in 1933. He went on to study law before he was drafted into the French army in 1939, where he served until 1942. Demobilized in Lyon, Déon spent two years in the southern *zone libre*, working alongside Charles Maurras at *L'Action française*.²⁹ Returning to Paris in 1944, he was increasingly alienated by the Sartrean-influenced existentialism of French intellectual circles and, in 1946, he began to travel extensively, first to Switzerland and Italy as a journalist, and later to North America, assisted by various grants. Travel became a dominant feature of Déon's life, and he spent a number of years living in Portugal, Switzerland, Greece and eventually Ireland, where he settled in the late 1960s. Déon's first novel, *Adieux à Sheila*, was published in 1944, and he went on to publish prodigiously, leading to his election, in 1978, to the *Académie française*. Often associated with the *Hussards*,³⁰ a polemical group of anti-Gaullist, anti-existentialist right-wing figures emerging in the 1950s and 1960s, Déon is perhaps surprising unknown in comparison to his contemporaries Roger Nimier, Antoine Blondin and Jacques Laurent despite the exceptional nature of his œuvre – spanning over eight decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – and the celebrity of several of his works, including *Un taxi mauve* (1973) and *Le Jeune homme vert* (1975). To a certain extent, this can be attributed to the *Hussards*'s disenfranchisement with the post-WW2 political literary aesthetic in Paris that cast them as outsiders in a cultural milieu dominated by Sartre and Camus; their aversion to

²⁹ Although a notoriously pro-collaborationist newspaper during the Occupation, no anti-Semitic work has ever been attributed to Déon directly. See Thierry Laurent, 'Michel Déon et les combats politiques', in *Michel Déon, aujourd'hui*, ed. by Alain Lanavere, Thierry Laurent and Jean-Pierre Poussou (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006), pp. 49–57 (p. 52).

³⁰ Named after Roger Nimier's *Le hussard bleu* (1950).

the prevailing intellectual agenda of the time has resulted in a reciprocal and at times hostile rejection by French – and international – academic and literary circles.³¹

Although Déon rejected 20th-century literary *engagement* as little more than ‘journalisme de propagande’³² or a form of ‘terrorisme intellectuel qui [a] empoisonné ... la vie littéraire en France’,³³ Thierry Laurent rejects the idea that Déon’s works be described as “‘l’art pour l’art’” à tout prix’.³⁴ Instead, Laurent suggests that Déon was ‘plus “contre-engagé” que “désengagé”’³⁵: ‘même s’il défend l’idée d’une littérature libre, il lui a paru parfois nécessaire de prendre position dans quelques-uns de ses livres’.³⁶ In particular, Laurent notes what he calls Déon’s three ‘coups de colère’: his concerns over the expansion of Marxism in the global East, the Algerian crisis and the years of de Gaulle’s presidencies both following the Second World War and at the birth of the Fifth Republic.³⁷ As Laurent explains: ‘dans beaucoup de ses livres (quel qu’en soit le genre), il nous révèle – explicitement ou implicitement – ses opinions quant à la situation politique (passée ou présente) dans son pays ou à l’étranger, ou bien quant à des problèmes de société ou d’éthique’.³⁸

Originally published in 1970, *Les Poneys sauvages* won the *Prix Interallié* the same year and narrowly missed out on the *Goncourt*, accused of being ‘trop réactionnaire’,³⁹ particularly on the topics of Algeria and communism. An ambitious attempt to write

³¹ See Thierry Laurent, ‘Les Hussards ou la Droite Littéraire’, *Literatūra* 55: 4 (2013), 26–36.

³² Laurent, ‘Michel Déon ou le contre-engagement’, in *Déon*, ed. by Laurence Tacou (Paris: Cahiers de l’Herne, 2009), p. 25.

³³ Déon, *Parlons-en* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 68.

³⁴ Laurent, ‘Michel Déon ou le contre-engagement’, p. 25 Laurent, *Michel Déon: écrivain engagé ou désengagé?*, p. 135.

³⁵ Laurent, *Michel Déon: Écrivain engagé ou désengagé?*, p. 70.

³⁶ Laurent, ‘Michel Déon et les combats politiques’ p. 56.

³⁷ Laurent, *Michel Déon: Écrivain engagé ou désengagé?*, pp. 79-109.

³⁸ Laurent, ‘Michel Déon ou le contre-engagement’, p. 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

‘l’histoire de ma génération’,⁴⁰ *Les Poneys sauvages* charts the fragmented lives of five Cambridge graduates through their encounters and correspondences from 1937 until the end of the 1960s. The First World War casts a dark shadow over the men, thrust into the bloody conflicts of the Second World War, the rise of international communism and the decline of European domination, and the narrative reflects simultaneously on friendship and love, loyalty and betrayal, the past, the present and the future. Through the voice of the narrator, ‘M.’ (p. 386),⁴¹ the life of his friend Georges Saval is recounted through their episodic encounters and interconnects with the lives of Englishmen Barry Roots, Horace – ‘Ho’ – McKay and Cyril Courtney, characters distinctly inspired by the extraordinary developments of the ‘Cambridge Five’, the Soviet spy ring recruited from Cambridge University and who, in 1970, would have been only the ‘Cambridge Three’, Kim Philby, Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess – the public outings of Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross still to come.⁴²

From England to France, Italy, Greece, Yemen, Portugal, Ireland and Poland, international disquiet thrusts the protagonists from one political disaster to another and details the restlessness and conflicts of the three decades as the protagonists float – sometimes literally – between episodic encounters, impossible ideological struggles and inevitable failures.⁴³ The narrator’s anti-Gaullism appears immediately in the wake of the Second World

⁴⁰ Michel Déon, *Cavalier, passe ton chemin!* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. 25.

⁴¹ ‘M’ may of course stand for M[ichel Deon] but the narrator never draws attention to further similarities.

⁴² Blunt was publicly exposed in 1979 and Cairncross only in 1990.

⁴³ For an overview of how the novel’s absence of coherence and unity and profusion of space, characters and action develops a critique of the time see François Ricard, ‘*Les Poneys Sauvages*: le roman de la profusion sans fin’, in Déon, ed. by Laurence Tacou (Paris: Cahiers de l’Herne, 2009), pp. 45-49. Ricard suggests that the novel portrays ‘un univers irrémédiablement éclaté, informe, dépourvu de centre et comme en proie à une mobilité sans fin [...] dans lequel l’Histoire n’a plus de sens perceptible, dans lequel l’espace n’a plus de centre, et dans lequel, surtout, l’individu, quoi qu’il fasse, ne peut plus transformer sa vie en “destin”’ (pp. 46-47).

War to undermine the internal actions of the nation in achieving victory. As the war comes to an end in Europe on 8 May 1945, the narrator describes the scenes in the streets of Paris as a grotesque and hysterical carnival of flesh and excess for ‘un peuple vaincu et relevé par la victoire de ses alliés’ (p. 80). But the myth of resistancialism becomes particularly dangerous in the novel when it is presented as the driving force for the expansion of communist recruitment in the post-war years.

Although not of the generation of *mode rétro* writers and filmmakers, Déon’s *Les Poneys sauvages* coincides with its tradition and timing and his protagonists are representative of the unvoiced minority whose disenfranchisement with the dominant historical narrative of Gaullist resistancialism casts them as exiles and orphans in the wake of the Second World War.⁴⁴ Unable to identify with the myth that defines both collective and individual heritage, Ho and Barry find solace in communist ideology:

Le communisme dont on ignorait encore tous les épouvantables crimes et les génocides était, en cette année 1951, une tentation logique et raisonnable depuis la fin de la guerre dont le Parti se proclamait grand vainqueur, auréolé d’un prestige immense volé en majeure partie aux obscurs héros de la lutte armée. Rien ne pouvait être pire que l’angoisse et la peur dans laquelle nous avons vécu. Rien. [...] Devait-on s’en remettre aux technocrates qui préparaient, au nom de la morale, un monde d’une amoralité parfaite, ou aux communistes qui préparaient au moyen de l’amoralité un monde moral qu’ils prétendaient parfait ? (2010, pp. 102–3)

[Le communisme était encore, en cette année 51, la seule tentation logique et raisonnable depuis la fin de la guerre dont il sortait grand vainqueur, auréolé d’un prestige immense volé en majeure partie aux obscurs héros de la lutte souterraine et

⁴⁴ See Morris, *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed*, pp. 79-118.

aux combattants sans étiquette des maquis. Certes, le communisme forçait la note, mais il y était obligé au niveau des militants pour recouvrir du voile de l'oubli la criminelle collusion avec l'Allemagne. Pour les uns, il relevait le flambeau du nazisme vaincu dont la disparition laissait comme une horrible nostalgie dans le cœur des révolutionnaires. Pour les autres, il refusait le monde aveuli qui avait permis cette dernière guerre. Rien ne pouvait être pire que l'angoisse et la peur dans laquelle nous avions vécu. Rien. [...] Mais devait-on se confier aux technocrates qui préparaient, au nom de la morale, un monde d'une amoralité parfaite, ou aux communistes qui préparaient au moyen de l'amoralité un monde moral qu'ils prétendaient parfait? (1970, pp. 91-2)].⁴⁵

Drawing attention to the mythologization of the historical record, Déon does not so much debunk the myth of resistancialist rhetoric as provide his own counter-mythologization of the post-war narrative: if each individual were a part of the collective effort against Nazi forces, then why not qualify the imposed heritage and identity of resistance to fascism through adherence to the Communist Party?

As Liedeke Plate, in her feminist reading of rewriting as a performative demythologization of socio-historical structures suggests, 'from the perspective of cultural memory, the gesture of demythologizing may be little more than a laying bare of the device. It reveals how the transmission of knowledge is mediated and transformed, yet has no real or

⁴⁵ The differences here between the 1970 edition and the 2010 edition are important. In the earlier edition, Déon conflates Gaullist and Communist rhetoric, adopting a right-wing stance that subsumes communist resistance under the tone of de Gaulle's more general resistancialism. In the later edition, the centrality of the communist role is omitted to allow for de Gaulle's dominant narrative to sit separately. While it is true that both ideologies of resistancialism and Communist resistance aided one another in the immediate vitriol against collaborators, their separation has always been apparent in the Communist party's disdain for de Gaulle. See Julian Jackson, 'General de Gaulle and his Enemies: Anti-Gaullism in France since 1940', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1999), 43–65 (pp. 44–8).

significant effect upon social behaviour'.⁴⁶ In other words, demythologization exposes *that* a process of mythologization took place, but it has no power to disinter the naturalization of the historical record from the sociocultural framework in which it has become embedded.

Drawing on cognitive scientist George Lakoff's *The Political Mind* (2009), Plate argues that 'demythologizing does not reframe what it demystifies. In fact, demythologizing not only leaves the frame intact; it actually inscribes it deeper in the mind'.⁴⁷ Demythologization, therefore, is rather a counter- or re-mythologization; another part of the hermeneutic circle or layer of interpretation in the historical narrative. In *Les Poneys sauvages*, the anti-Gaullist critique does not reveal truths about the past so much as it imposes a counter-mythologizing narrative that exposes and animates the interpretative battle over historical events. In line with Hayden White's thinking, the quantitative facts of the past cannot, therefore, be 'found' because they are embedded within the sociolinguistic frame that has always already been distorted by attempts to understand history. In many ways, Déon's work suggests, historical narrative is not *found* so much as it comes to *find us* as it is woven and rewoven into our present and future narratives. As his detailed interpretation of the Si Salah affair will show, myth is better than silence, and the reanimation of myth through demythologization reveals subjectivities and inconsistencies that expound narratological historiography.

Remythologizing Myth: The Si Salah Affair and Historical Subjectivity

Forty years after its release, *Les Poneys sauvages* was revised and republished and, while the 2010 edition displays no radical changes or revisions, it demonstrates the author's journalistic background, meticulously correcting the figures of the dead at Katyn forest from 10,000 (*Poneys*, 1970, p. 131) to 18,000 (*Poneys*, 2010, p. 147) – a figure nonetheless still lower

⁴⁶ Liedeke Plate, *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 170.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

than the current estimate of 22,000 – amending the name of Daniel’s *lycée* in Nice (1970, p. 160; 2010, p. 181), and extending a monologue on the poet Rupert Brooke (1970, p. 252; 2010, p. 279) among other very minor alterations. The later version does, however, show a nuancing of the author’s comprehensive anti-communism, changing some references to ‘communisme’ to ‘Staline’ (1970, p. 59; 2010, p. 70), to ‘Moscou’ (1970, p. 314; 2010, p. 347), or to ‘internationalisation’ (1970, pp. 299-300; 2010, p. 331), and retracting his prediction that Japan – rather than China – would be the ‘maître de l’Asie’ in the latter half of the twentieth century (1970, p. 313; 2010, p. 347). One episode, however, receives particularly significant and painstaking revision, with large sections of text cut and other details brought up to date.

In extensive detail, Déon imagines and inscribes the events that have come to be known as the ‘Si Salah’ – real name Mohamed Zamoum – affair (1970, pp. 179–203; 2010, pp. 199–226).⁴⁸ As far the events are known today, the Si Salah affair arose in 1960 when Si Salah, Si Lakhdar, Halim and Abdellatif, FLN leaders of *wilaya IV* – a strategic district located close to Algiers – responded to de Gaulle’s offer to negotiate a *paix des braves*. Frustrated that the GPRA (*Gouvernement provisoire de la République algérienne*) – the FLN’s government-in-exile in Tunis – had refused earlier calls to determine a peaceful resolution to the war, and believing that remaining military efforts were hampered by lack of arms and ammunition,⁴⁹ Si Salah and his adjoints, Si Lakhdar and Si Mohamed,⁵⁰ were met in

⁴⁸ Minor corrections include amending ‘Louis IX’ to ‘Louis VII’ (1970, p. 201; 2010, p. 223) in a scathing attack on France’s surrender of Algeria and correcting the origin of Si Mohamed’s killers from the ‘11e demi-brigade parachutiste’ to the ‘2e’ (1970, p. 201; 2010, p. 224). Approximately two pages of text are cut from the patrol’s journey to meet Si Salah (1970, pp. 183–5; 2010, pp. 204–5).

⁴⁹ See ‘Un message radio de Si Salah au GPRA’, in Pierre Montagnon, *L’Affaire Si Salah* (Paris: Pygmalion, 1987), pp. 179–80.

⁵⁰ The spelling of Si Mohamed’s name varies according to the source. I have maintained the spelling used by Déon for consistency.

Algeria by de Gaulle's secretary-general, Bernard Tricot, and received at the *Élysée* on 10 June by the president, 'prêts à faire la paix avec ou sans le GPRA'.⁵¹ Negotiations, however, were brief and woefully unsuccessful: de Gaulle refused the Algerians' request to meet with the captured revolutionary Ahmed Ben Bella and offered a partial ceasefire only in the event that the GPRA rejected his new offer to negotiate a total ceasefire. De Gaulle was not interested, therefore, in speaking to FLN leaders as he had previously intimated; he wanted only to negotiate with the GPRA. On 14 June, the president made a fresh appeal to the GPRA that was answered by the equally doomed Melun negotiations. The Si Salah affair, however, was more than just a failed discussion. For de Gaulle's right-wing detractors – and notably Maurice Challe, one of the military leaders who took part in the 1961 attempt to overthrow de Gaulle – the dissention of key FLN leaders suggested Algeria's disunity and military weakness and posed an opportunity to avoid independence. For his three interlocutors, the negotiations became mere leverage in de Gaulle's later discussions with the GPRA, and this betrayal of a promise to negotiate a *paix des braves* exposed Si Salah, Si Lakhdar and Si Mohamed to the suspicions and reprisals of their own party: they would all be purged from the FLN before the end of the war.⁵²

Déon's account centres on the preliminary meetings held in Algeria between the

⁵¹ Montagnon, *L'affaire Si Salah*, p. 75.

⁵² For an overview of the events in context, see Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 282–5; Julian Jackson, *Charles de Gaulle* (London: Haus, 2003), p. 86; Gilbert Meynier, *Histoire intérieure du FLN 1954–1962* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), pp. 425–30; and Montagnon, *L'affaire Si Salah*. The circumstances surrounding the deaths of all those involved in the affair have added to its mystery. Si Lakhdar, Abdellatif and Halim were all executed by or on the orders of Si Mohamed, who replaced Si Salah at the head of the *wilaya* when Salah went into hiding. The deaths of Si Salah and Si Mohamed, committed by the French army, raise speculation about their motivations. See Meynier, *Histoire intérieure du FLN*, p. 429; Montagnon, *L'affaire Si Salah*, pp. 124–129; 137; 144–145.

French military and the leaders of Wilaya IV, and on the attempted publication of details of the meeting at the Élysée. Scepticism of de Gaulle's position on Algeria undermines confidence in the military's role and raises suspicions over the futility of their actions: French officers doubt the official line to maintain l'Algérie française “De Dunkerque à Tamanrasset” (*Poneys*, 2010, p. 204)⁵³ and, if negotiation of a paix des braves fails, it will be proof of the intention to surrender Algeria at the cost of a war staged for the purposes of a mythological ‘victorious defeat’. As Colonel P.⁵⁴ confides to Georges Saval, engaged to remember and transcribe the proceedings in Algeria:

J'ai bien plus de craints pour Si Salah et ses compagnons. Voilà deux mois que nous nous employons à leur inspirer confiance. [...] Leur courage, leur volonté ont commencé à cimenter une nation algérienne qui n'existait pas, et que ne représentent absolument pas les politiciens à l'abri de la frontière tunisienne. [...] Si notre gouvernement, parce qu'il a déjà partie liée avec les politiciens en exil, repoussait l'offre de Si Salah et des siens, je ne me pardonnerais pas, parce que ce serait leur condamnation à mort. [...] Si nous réussissons, vous serez le premier et le seul à pouvoir faire un récit exact de l'opération. Si nous échouons, parce que le président de la République a d'autres obscurs desseins, je vous demande de crier la vérité sur les toits et de dire comment la France a refusé de garder l'Algérie [...] En d'autres temps, on appellerait ça de la haute trahison. Aujourd'hui, c'est de la politique. [...] Nous aurons sacrifié quelques milliers de vies de jeunes Français pour rien.’ (pp. 210–11).

⁵³ The 1970 edition reproduces two infamous quotes from de Gaulle: “Je vous ai compris” and “De Dunkerque à Tamanrasset” (p. 183). The 2010 edition adds a third: “Il n’y a plus que des Français à part entière” (p. 204).

⁵⁴ This initial does not appear to correlate directly to any of the actors in the original meeting with Si Salah. The colonel referred to is most likely Édouard Mathon who, alongside de Gaulle's advisor and representative of the Élysée, Bernard Tricot, is widely cited as the military envoy in discussions with FLN leaders.

Yet Déon's account is also centred on the 'silence abominable' (p. 222) of this affair. With all direct witnesses of the events gruesomely silenced, Georges Saval, who is tasked with recording and publishing details of the meeting at the Élysée (pp. 209–13), finds his own account ridiculed and refused: 'Nous ne prenons pas de roman-feuilleton. Ajoutez-y une histoire d'amour et publiez-le dans un magazine féminin' (p. 225). Eventually appearing in a minor weekly publication, the article passes unnoticed (p. 225).

Of the minor alterations appearing between the two editions of *Les Poneys sauvages*, one brings the silencing of this affair to centre stage. The narrator declares the fictionalization of his account of the 'ultra-secrète' (p. 223)⁵⁵ meeting at the Élysée by drawing on the failure and opacity of the historical record: 'Ce qui suit appartient plus à l'Histoire qu'aux personnages de ce récit, mais l'Histoire est complaisante à l'égard de ceux qui ont l'orgueilleuse prétention de la faire, et le temps, la mort, les bouches cousues, la lâcheté fardent la vérité' (p. 222). History, in other words, has failed to deliver an account of the past, and the role of fiction must be to illuminate the events of 1960. In 1970, Déon writes that the account of these negotiations 'n'a pu être publié que dix ans plus tard et il faudra sans doute encore dix ans pour qu'il figure dans les manuels d'histoire' (1970, p. 200), but, even forty years later, the truth is still suppressed: 'il faudra sans doute encore *cinquante* ans pour qu'il figure *peut-être* dans les manuels d'Histoire' (2010, p. 222, emphasis mine). Déon's point, however, is not just that the historical record has been silenced but that history *does not exist* without narrative, or without some form of expression and exposure.

Les Poneys sauvages is an anti-Gaullist critique of the twentieth century and of the successful mythologization of historical events, but it is also an admission of the narrative significance of myth. Myth may be a distortion, but it is inherently also an invitation for

⁵⁵ An identical description of the events can be found in Montagnon, *L'affaire Si Salah*, p. 167.

demythologization and thus for interpretation and reinterpretation. In the Barthesian poststructuralist tradition, myth is always already embedded in the world that we live in: *myth finds us* through the structures that govern identity, understanding and ideology. While myth may be exposed, demythologization cannot unravel the compounded interpretative frameworks that enabled, and were enabled by, mythologization. Demythologization, in other words, is an act of illumination, not elimination. Demythologization draws focus towards the ideological underpinnings of all interpretation – including historical interpretation – and therefore to the inherent ideological frameworks that govern de-mythologization, counter-mythologization, or re-mythologization.

If there can be no such thing as an objective account of history, are ambiguity and uncertainty not themselves valuable in understanding the past? By showing that historical ‘truth’ cannot ever be definitively and objectively known, interpretative demythologization illuminates not only the influences of structural myths but also the sensitivity and subjectivity of events and experiences.⁵⁶ At a time when memory of the Algerian war is still complicated, vulnerable and fragile, demythologization animates narratives of memory and counter-memory and lays a path for the valuable interpretative battle of control over historical narrative. Myth incites counter-myth, a new narrative interpretation that reanimates historical events, spaces and persons and integrates the past into the present. Without demythologization, the mythological naturalization of history purges individual experience from the dominant worldview. Demythologization, then, is not a definitive exposure of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ but an endless opportunity for subjectivity, interpretation and

⁵⁶ For Ricard, in ‘*Les Poneys Sauvages: le roman de la profusion sans fin*’, such a ‘*négociation constante*’ of events both past and present is at the heart of *Les Poneys sauvages* and contributes to the narrative’s – and history’s – lack of conclusive *dénouement*. The truth of any event is illusory, lacunary and uncertain, ‘*toujours partielle et sujette à (ré)interrogation*’ (p. 48).

reinterpretation. If mythologization makes history natural, as Barthes claimed, demythologization makes it personal.