

Society for History Education

The Unsolved Cryptogram

Author(s): P. F. M. Fontaine

Source: *The History Teacher*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (May, 1988), pp. 341-348

Published by: [Society for History Education](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/493000>

Accessed: 09/02/2014 09:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Society for History Education is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The History Teacher*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Unsolved Cryptogram

P. F. M. Fontaine

International Society for History Didactics

IN HIS NOVEL *THE ASSAULT* (1982), the Dutch author Harry Mulisch writes that the only one who really understood the English Wars of the Roses was Shakespeare. Innumerable volumes have been written about this period by professional historians, and there is hardly an historical person or event that has not been described and discussed. Moreover, the experts agree that however impressive Shakespeare's dramas may be, they are not true histories. Yet Mulisch the novelist pushes the experts' judgments carelessly aside. In his view the mythological dimension Shakespeare gives to these wars is far preferable to the painstaking accuracy of the historians; it is this greater dimension Mulisch pursues in his novel. The subject of *The Assault* is a fatal and bloody incident which occurred during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, the effects of which are still felt in the lives of its victims. Mulisch relates the event faithfully. A person such as myself who lived in that time might say that, indeed, it was exactly as Mulisch describes it. Yet Mulisch also adds a mythological dimension to the story by presenting World War II, with all its attendant horror and violence, as a mystery ultimately inaccessible to historians, however much they may analyze it.

Anton, the principal character of the book and the true victim of the incident, is not at all interested in politics or in history, not even in that of World War II. His passion is for solving cryptograms, for which he has an unusual talent. Mulisch clearly means to juxtapose Anton's gift for solving puzzles with what he perceives as the historian's and the politician's inability to understand the riddle of our times, to see what is

hidden beneath the surface of things. For instance, I have often asked Dutch and German historians in which direction the swastika turns. They look at me in astonishment—sometimes they even laugh at me—and declare solemnly, “But it does not turn at all!” It does, of course, since it is a wheel, a sun-wheel, and it is a decisive factor whether it turns to the right or to the left. If it turns to the right, following the course of the sun, it is then a favorable sign; if it turns to the left, against the course of nature and of the world, it is thus a negative sign, an omen of destruction. During the great Nazi demonstrations, for example the *Reichsparteitage* at Nuremberg, enormous swastikas were shown, impressively transformed into a living thing by boys and girls of the Hitler *Jugend*, all with flaming torches in their hands. And there, in these mysterious night-festivals of Nazism, the swastikas turned to the left! Not a single historian I know detected that this well-known emblem of National Socialism is fundamentally a symbol of doom and destruction.

But Mulisch did, indirectly but unmistakably. His Anton is initially unable to solve the cryptogram “Cannot the Sun-God describe this ruin more exactly?,” supposedly answerable in six letters. Although he is usually very good at this kind of riddle, this time he is baffled. The solution comes very suddenly, in the closing pages of the novel—the six-letter word is “ravage.” In Dutch “ravage” is a noun: the solution to the cryptogram is found in the fact that the sun-god is “Ra,” and his description of the ruin was vague (*vage* in Dutch). The Sun-God made a ruin of it, a “ravage.” This, then, is exactly the meaning of the swastika symbol.

The development of historiography since the age of Enlightenment has brought many important things to scholarship: accuracy, exact chronology, objectivity, new sources, the principle of verification. These qualities are now the very essence of history and are significant and authentic gains, crucial to the teaching of history, that have made it a more precise discipline. But at the same time a few precious elements were lost in the process. Our exact and very elaborate chronology has become so rigid that it has lost all contact with the normal sense of time as people experience it. The scholar’s very special brand of “timing” is a source of children’s pervasive hatred of “dates.” The historiography that school textbooks present is depersonalized, devoid of personal elements. The historical actors figuring in them are not people of flesh and blood but schematic representations, mostly of power. Proper historiography can be termed “hypostasized” history, which witnesses the modern historian’s great predilection for colligating concepts and covering laws, for general trends and evolutionary lines of development. Usually, historians and the textbooks they write neglect the detail, the anecdotes—things that in their

opinion are not scientific; but the general public expects something else of history.

Historiography has become completely secularized. By this I not only mean that it shows very little interest in religion but also for any thing that is beyond the scope of the positivist: the supernatural, the divine, the symbolic, the demonic and the tragic. Moreover, historians have no grasp of the mythic. In their opinion, "myth" represents essentially that which is not true; it is a product of fantasy, contradicting their understanding of history. History is that which has really happened—in Ranke's famous dictum: "Wie es eigentlich gewesen." In addition, this patriarch of modern history said of the novels of Walter Scott: "What has been handed down to us by history is more beautiful and, anyhow, more interesting...than romantic fiction." Elsewhere he argued that "historical occurrences have no symbolic value." I am afraid that historians still maintain the attitude that they must avoid in their work everything that is invented and fabricated and keep strictly to the facts. But it is exactly this dogmatic "sticking to the facts" that people interested in the past abhor. They avoid the rigidly accurate articles, monographs and handbooks; they show little respect for our carefully composed history textbooks. What they like are historical novels and movies, and the historians despise them for it.

But what are these much celebrated "facts," hypostasized as "objective facts"? Are the "historical facts" of the *Iliad* that a Greek army besieged a great city for a long time, and those of the *Odyssey* that one of the great generals experienced great adventures during a long journey home? Or is it, like G. K. Chesterton said, that the *Iliad* is about the conduct of people under the stress of war, and the *Odyssey* about their behavior when they are wandering and homeless? The point is not that an archaic inscription may be found with some Hellenic name that resembles that of Achilles or Odysseus, but that every one of us is an Odysseus wandering on the earth in a situation of fundamental uncertainty—a condition in which we have to rely on our own resources, although sometimes a god may come to our help. Does not Homer tell us something important that the historian does not?

It will be clear by now that what I mean by "myth" is not mythology—stories told about the gods—but rather the subject matter of the literatures and cultures of all ages, of art in general, and, in our time especially, of the opera and the film. There exists a stock of mythical tales which, in ever new versions and adapted to other circumstances, constantly reoccur in art. It was no coincidence, of course, that Verdi drew upon so many of Shakespeare's plays for the subject matter of his own operas. In his film "Amadeus," Milos Forman gave us a thoroughly mythologized version of Mozart's life—Mozart dictating on his deathbed the last bars of his

Requiem to his rival Salieri!—and the general public, utterly uninterested in this historical fact, liked it immensely. What exactly do people prefer in “mythology,” or, to fit it within the context of this essay, what is the difference between myth and history—history understood as historiography in the modern sense?

First of all, the great themes of myth are timeless, they are basically human, and they form an essential part of our *conditio humana*. Or, to express it in another way, we need myths to explain reality to ourselves. The great mythical stories make life bearable for us, they teach us that what happens to us is inescapably human. Here the historian will object that he shares the same understanding. Perhaps this is true, but the public does not see it that way. This is the historian’s own fault, for he is always repeating that history is about change. “The essence of history is change,” declared Jakob Burckhardt peremptorily. This, however, is a *contradiccio in terminis*, for how can the essence of things be changed? And how can we observe that there is change unless against a background of constancy? We, the professionals of time and change, tend to forget that there is a timeless domain in man, the domain of myth and religion. I think that the main tenet of historicism—that all history is change—is fundamentally wrong. Non-historians, our pupils included, are much more keenly aware of this than we are. In my opinion, the reception of our teaching of history is hindered considerably, not so much because children and adults explain the world according to a mythical model, but because we prefer to ignore this.

I spoke of the timelessness of myth. This does not mean that there is no sense of time in it. Not only does nearly every fairy tale start with the words “Once upon a time...,” but in the tale itself one finds a regular time-sequence, and the action proceeds along the time-line. Yet what myths abhors is the pedantry of arithmetical chronology: the events cannot be fixed on an exact spot of the time-line. Historians in turn are horrified by such sloppiness. Let us examine a few examples.

In his great (and only) novel *Le grand Meaulnes* (1912), Alain Fournier introduces his subject thus: “He [the great Meaulnes] arrived at our home one day of the year 189-.” The date is not filled in. He ends the book as follows: “He [again the great Meaulnes] disappeared into the night departing for new adventures.” A short period is cut out of the time-line, inside this period there is a more or less regular time sequence, but no connection with past and future.

The greatest novel of this century, Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, has, as the title says, Time (with a capital letter) as its subject. The very first sentence is about Time: “A long time I went to bed early”; the last words, five thousand pages of the original Gallimard edition later,

again mentions Time. People, this last passage says, have only a very restricted place in space, but an immensely prolonged one "in Time." That the action, as far as there is any, occurs in the second half of the nineteenth century is evident, for the Dreyfus affair is mentioned. Yet exactly when is as difficult to tell as the exact age of the narrator in the different parts of the novel. Time seems to shift forward and backward at will. Once, in the famous episode "A Love of Swann," there is a flash-back to a moment before the narrator—the "I" of the novel—was born. At the end of this part Swann states sadly that he has wasted two years of his life on a woman (Odette de Crecy) "whom he did not like, who was not his genre." Nevertheless, in the next part he is married to Odette, without one word of explanation having been given. This indifference to causality and chronology was expressed in a classical manner in the most famous novel published at the end of the eighteenth century, *Paul et Virginie*, by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1789). Of this work at least 233 editions appeared in France alone as well as innumerable translations (26 editions in English alone by 1894). It was used several times as the subject for operas, ballets and stage-plays. In the year of publication the author received more than four thousand enthusiastic letters. In the history taught at school, Paul could see nothing but "generally and regularly occurring catastrophes without a cause." "They [Paul and Virginie, living on an island] had no clocks, no almanacs, no books on chronology, history and philosophy. The periods of their life were determined by those of nature." Is it a coincidence that this utterly antihistorical novel appeared in the first year of one of the greatest periods of history, that of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars? It is as though the author and his readers wanted to escape to the idyllic island of these children of Nature.

A strong point of myth is that it is essentially an interpretation of events. Here the historian protests again that he too offers an interpretation. But if we look through our history texts, do they really explain things? It seems that historians often believe that mere factual description or narration is the same as interpretation. It partly is, indeed: even the smallest anecdote is not only a short sequence of events but also an interpretation of them. In other words, the way a story is told always gives the related events a wider significance. But the models and modules historians use do not possess enough scope to contain the whole reality. They are, for instance, much too "demythologized" to be able to explain Hitler. Why did he persecute the Jews? Merely placing him in the tradition of European anti-Semitism is not enough to explain why he coolly ordered the killing of six million Jews by rational, bureaucratic, and technical methods.

What I mean by the lack of a mythical interpretation in modern historiography, I shall try to make clear with the help of the following

example. During the Nazi occupation of their country, the Dutch had their own "Quisling" in the person of Mussert, the leader of the Dutch National-Socialist Movement. He collaborated with the Germans and was executed for high treason in 1946. In 1984 a Dutch historian, Jan Meyers, published the first book about this man, *Mussert: A Political Life*. According to the standards of our trade this is a very fine book. It is well-written, interesting and detailed, and above all it is fair and objective. This is no mean achievement, given the animosity that still pervades this country towards Germany and Nazism. Moreover, Mussert, the traitor, was a deeply hated and despised man. But when I see the subtitle, *A Political Life*, I begin to wonder whether there were not other aspects to this life. While Meyers gives all the facts, he does not adequately interpret them, as I shall attempt to demonstrate.

Mussert was married to his aunt, a sister of his mother and nineteen years older than he was. Both his grandfather and great-grandfather were married to women considerably older than themselves. His father and mother were of the same age, although his father left the Catholic Church and became a Protestant in order to marry her. There is a curious streak of subjection to women in the Mussert family. In the constant and overt conflict between his parents Mussert finally sided with his mother emotionally. Must one be an adept Freudian to see that in his aunt Mussert married a substitute for his mother, thus in essence committing incest? And when the affective relations between these two faded away at last, Mussert took as his mistress a nineteen year-old girl who—incest again!—was his niece and young enough to be his daughter, the daughter he never had.

Meyers portrays Mussert as a petty bourgeois with an infantile character, driven by his "mother complex," always looking for the protective female figure. But apart from the fact that his young mistress was his 'daughter' rather than his mother, I would ask: was the great model of an incestuous relationship, King Oedipus, an infantile character too? This greatest tragedy of all never would have had its incredible impact, even in our own time, if this unhappy king had been a child-figure seeking protection in the arms of Queen Jocasta. But Meyers let slip the opportunity to interpret these curious, 'mythical' elements in Mussert's life according to the 'model' presented by Sophocles. True to Ranke's dictum, he restricts himself to giving the "objective facts."

But by far the greatest attraction of myth is, I believe, its personal appeal, an appeal from person to person. Alan Bullock's excellent book on Hitler begins as follows: "Adolf Hitler was born at half past six on the evening of 20 April, 1889, in the Gasthof zum Pommer, an inn in the small town of Braunau on the River Inn which forms the frontier between

Austria and Bavaria." Could one be more precise? This is modern history writing with a vengeance. Compare this to the first sentence—one of the most charming I know—of one of the most popular historical novels of our time, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936): "Scarlett O'Hara had green eyes." Are there historical works that begin in this way? "Socrates was a very ugly man," "Julius Caesar had a bald head"? But Mitchell moves us at once into the erotic radiation of Scarlett O'Hara. Myth asks us to identify with it: a man who saw Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" on the stage said afterwards, "I saw my own marriage."

Now the historian remains silent, for he does not want us to identify with historical persons. He does not want us to be Caesar, Napoleon, or Hitler. We have to put ourselves at some distance, we must not get mixed up in their personalities or adventures, nor be lost in the maelstrom of events: we must force ourselves to remain "objective." We do not realize that to be objective means to see persons as objects, as things, different from and alien to us. This is therefore why myth so easily surpasses history in the estimation of the public. People simply want to do what historians forbid them: to identify, to personalize historical figures and events. Literature very often is clearly anti-historical. "Public things mean nothing to me. I like what is private, only that interests me. Private life, simple humanity is more important, greater and more tragic than anything that is public." This is what the Austrian author Joseph Roth, himself a Jewish exile from his Nazi-occupied country, has one of his characters say in *The Confession of a Murderer*. People can thoroughly and authentically identify only with private persons, with individuals, not with the conceptualized constructions of the historian.

But now the historian indignantly wags his finger at me. Have I never heard of family history and of ego-documents—new trends in history writing? Yes, I have, but I also see that this new mode is usually limited to collectivities—the women, the children, the family—and not this woman, this child, this family. A case in point is Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* (1978). It became immensely popular, largely because it is built on the adventures of one individual family. But it was poorly received in historical circles since it was not written in accordance with the rules of the trade.

In conclusion, historical science—along with its offspring the teaching of history—is in a dangerous quandary. I am not at all sure that either has much of a future before them. Professional historians are so deeply ensconced in their ivory towers, so firmly entrenched behind the barricades of their methodologies, so addicted to their habitual patterns of thought that I often despair of them. It seems to me that the gap between

historians and the general public, including students, is growing wider and wider. Perhaps we might be taught something by the way myth handles history, people and life. But for this we must learn to solve cryptograms.