The Total Work of Art in European Modernism

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The Secularization of Art: Quatremère de Quincy

The birth of the total work of art from the spirit of revolution cannot be separated from the fundamental break in the function, purpose, and meaning of art brought to consciousness by the French Revolution. The will to create a new civil religion that directly challenged the hegemony of the Catholic Church found practical and symbolic expression in the expropriation and secularization of church property. The remodeling of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris into the Pantheon of the heroes of the Revolution went together with confiscation and collection of church treasures destined to form the core of the national patrimony. Jean Starobinski speaks of the Pantheon and the Museum as two characteristic institutions of the Revolution that shared a common intention: to combine historical knowledge with the exaltation of great men.1 The transformation of church into national pantheon and of royal palace into public museum (the Louvre was opened as a museum on 10 August 1793

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1. Jean Starobinski, 1789: Les emblèmes de la raison (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 198. Friedrich Schinkel’s Altes Museum, Berlin, constructed in the 1820s, had this double function of the historical and the exemplary. The central dome, modeled after the Roman Pantheon, displays Greek statues. The surrounding galleries were arranged according to art-historical principles. See Beat Wyss, Hegel’s Art History and the Critique of Modernity, trans. Caroline Dobson-Saltzwedel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
on the anniversary of the fall of the monarchy) announced the “cultural secularization of history.” This cultural secularization aimed on the one hand to make the art treasures of the past available to the public, as in the case of the Louvre, and on the other to endow the republic with a national heritage, as in the case of Alexandre Lenoir’s Musée des Monuments Français. The museum was thus fashioned by the new historicist sense of history, which would make it in the spirit of Hegel the repository of humanity’s history, and in the spirit of cultural nationalism the vessel of a people’s innate genius.

The fundamental break in the understanding of the function of art, symbolized and institutionalized in the museum, elicited a number of responses that are relevant to the idea and to the history of the total work of art. We can follow Quatremère de Quincy in naming the crucial issues raised by the emergence of the national museum as the displacement and the destination of art. These issues and their consequences for art are reflected at the end of Goethe’s introduction to the first issue of his art journal, Propyläen. There he speaks of Italy as a great body of art (Kunstkörper), which at the very moment of writing (1798) is being dismembered, and of the new body of art that is in the process of being assembled in Paris. Douglas Crimp comments:

> With art history, the art entity that Goethe called Italy is forever lost…. Art as we think about it only came into being in the nineteenth century, with the birth of the museum and the discipline of art history…. For us, then, art’s natural end is in the museum, or, at the very least, in the imaginary museum, that idealist space that is art with a capital A. The idea of art as autonomous, as separate from everything else, as destined to take its place in art history, is a development of modernism.

Appealing to the cosmopolitan spirit that is nowhere more at home than in the arts and sciences, Goethe asks what can be done to create from the dispersed artistic treasures of Europe an ideal body of art that can perhaps compensate for present losses.

Quatremère’s Letters to General Miranda concerning the displacement of art monuments from Italy breathe this cosmopolitan spirit. Written in 1796 when he was in hiding under proscription by the Directoire, Quatremère’s letters were provoked by Bonaparte’s victories in Italy, which threatened the despoiling of Rome. Quatremère speaks like Goethe in the name of the republic of arts and letters, which belongs to Europe as a whole and not to individual nations and whose capital is

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Rome. A new sack of Rome would be a calamity for the cause of civilization, since Rome is to us what Greece was to Rome. As city, as place, as body of art, Rome represents an irrereplaceable totality that constitutes in all its parts a universal museum, whose integrity must be protected from dismemberment. This living unity of past and present in Rome signifies the continuity of culture from the ancients to the moderns, borne out by the ongoing archaeological recovery of antiquity, inspired and guided by papal policy.\(^5\) For Quatremère this ongoing archaeological recovery of antiquity amounts to a true resurrection, as opposed to the deadly discontinuity signaled by the rise of the museum, in which the amassing of objects serves only to display the vanity of science, because only the preservation of continuity with the past offers the possibility of creating the new: “I do not believe I am deceiving myself in predicting that all the causes of the revolution or regeneration of the arts, the most powerful and the most capable of producing an entirely new order of effects is this general resurrection of this nation (peuple) of statues, of this ancient world whose population increases daily.”\(^6\)

Quatremère is arguing from a conception of history that refuses the break with the continuity of civilization inherent in the new spirit of historicism. Although he played a significant cultural role in the Revolution—he was entrusted with the transformation of Sainte-Geneviève into the Pantheon, and along with David and others he acted as a director of the festivals of the Revolution—his understanding of “revolution or regeneration” in the field of art refuses the revolutionary rupture epitomized by and embodied in the Louvre. In a speech on the occasion of the festival of Thermidor, Year VI (27 July 1798), the minister of the interior and director of the Louvre, François de Neufchâteau, celebrated the plundering of the papal collection as an act of liberation, which had emancipated art from its alienation in the service of religion and the despotic state. Neufchâteau welcomed the return to the people of the artworks seized from French churches and palaces and from Italian and papal collections: “Today, these masterpieces are here for you to admire, steeped in the morality of a free nation.”\(^7\) Through this passage from enslavement to freedom, these masterpieces have become art for a free nation, because they were always free in themselves. Redeemed from servitude, they can now be seen for

\(^5\) The origins of the museum go back to Pope Sixtus IV’s restoration to the people of Rome of ancient statues in 1471, exhibited on the Capitoline Hill.

\(^6\) Quatremère, *Considérations morales*, 200. Hans-Georg Gadamer underscores the genetic bond between aestheticism and historicism when he writes that aesthetically cultured consciousness “does not see itself as this kind of integration of the ages; the simultaneity peculiar to it is based on the consciousness of historical relativity of taste.” Aesthetic consciousness creates its own special sites for simultaneity, such as the “universal library,” the museum, the theatre, and the concert hall. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 87.

\(^7\) For this and the following quotations from Neufchâteau’s speech, see Jean-Louis Déotte, “Rome, the Archetypal Museum, and the Louvre, the Negation of Division,” in *Art Museums*, ed. Susan Pearce (London: Athlone, 1995), 215–32.
what they truly are—that which persists from humanity’s history after the overthrow of kings and pontiffs. “Unsullied by impurity,” they are free to display for all “the gold of divinity” that belongs to genius. As opposed to Quatremère’s accusation of displacement as dismemberment, Neufchâteau justifies the museum as the temple of memory. By “releasing so many dead artists from the obscurity in which they languished and simultaneously crowning artists from thirty centuries,” the French nation has become the avenger of artists and the arts: “It is because of the French nation that they have today taken their rightful place in the temple of memory.”

Quatremère’s *Moral Considerations on the Destination of Works of Art*, written in 1807 but not published until 1815, denounces the museum as the negation of art’s social function and moral purpose. His rejection of modern attitudes to artworks, evident in commodification (the artwork as useful object), fashion (the artwork as useless object), and reification (the artwork as material object), clears the decks for an attack on the museum: “To remove them [artworks] without distinction from their social destination, what is this but to say that society has no need of them?” (37). Art dies once the bonds tying it to society are severed and it is deprived of public use and of public interest. This is not only the fate of the art of the past removed to the museum but the fate that necessarily awaits present and future art. The enclosure of art in the museum means that the public is no longer in a position to comprehend the original causes that alone made and make art possible. Against the “vicious circle,” which makes museums and living masterpieces mutually exclusive (36), Quatremère sets out the mutual need of art and religion: not only does art need religion as its destination; religion needs art for its beautiful illusion (55). The museum may conserve the body, but the spirit, the beliefs and the ideas that gave to artworks their being, has fled. This disinheritance enacts, on the one hand, the “de-divinization” of art (55), the desacralization to which all art is subject in the museum; on the other, it fetishizes the artwork as aesthetic object, reconstituted by the historical “spirit of criticism” that allows Venuses and Madonnas to share indifferently the same space. In other words, the virtuous circle of art and religion has now been replaced by the deadly union of art and knowledge, which had transformed the living body of art into the classification and chronology of decomposed fragments: “It is to kill art to make history of it; it is not to make history, but its epitaph” (48). Hans Sedlmayr termed this process of dismemberment of the living body of art the “death of the Gesamtkunstwerk.” Writing from the standpoint of the lost Gesamtkunstwerk of tradition, it is not surprising that Sedlmayr equates the monumental architecture of the revolutionary period with eternity and death: the pantheon, the mausoleum, the museum, and the library bear witness with their

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pure elementary forms not only to the deadly logic of the cultural secularization of religion and art but also to the monumental geometry of the masses in the festivals of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{10}

Hegel’s response to the cultural secularization proclaimed by the Enlightenment and the Revolution departs from that of Quatremère. Writing at the same time (1807), both concur in regarding the museum as signifying the death of art. But what the one accuses, the other vindicates. If both agree that the beautiful religion of the Greeks, the living work of art of the polis, has been lost, there remains the question of the possibility of great art in the modern world, the question, that is, of the destination of art. It was the question that Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling jointly and separately sought to answer, a question, moreover, that was not only posed by the French Revolution but was also tied directly to the fate of the Revolution. As Hegel observed in his \textit{Lectures on Philosophy}, only two nations participated in the French Revolution: the French in action, the Germans in thought. If we follow Starobinski this division of labor is to be read as the two paradigmatic attempts to reconcile nature and culture: through revolution in France and through the path of aesthetic education in Germany.\textsuperscript{11} The present chapter traces the second path from Schiller’s \textit{Letters on Aesthetic Education} and the philosophical fragment known as “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism” (which has been variously attributed to Hegel, Hölderlin, or Schelling but was most likely the product of their symphilosophizing) via Hölderlin’s quest to create a tragedy for the modern polis—that is, for the Swabian republic he hoped for—to Hegel’s interpretation of the destiny of art in the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} (1807) and the \textit{Lectures on Aesthetics} in the 1820s.

Aesthetic Education: Schiller

Robespierre’s religion of universal nature underscored the contradictions of refoundation. The state religion, designed to celebrate and enshrine universal brotherhood in and through Festivals of the Supreme Being, did not survive Robespierre’s fall, but it bequeathed the problem of a new religion for a new age, the civil religion that must be both the \textit{product} and the \textit{producer} of the people. In \textit{Émile} Rousseau had looked to education as the means to progress. But in arguing that it is the task of education to reconstitute nature as naturally as possible, Rousseau conceded the necessity of culture supplementing nature, at the same time as he sought to draw an

\textsuperscript{10} Sedlmayr, \textit{Verlust der Mitte}, 21–29. A decree of the Convention of 14 August 1793 announcing an architectural competition stated that architecture should be regenerated through geometry. See Starobinski, \textit{1789}, 182.

Friedrich Schiller cuts through Rousseau’s conundrum by insisting on the centrality of mediation against the phantasm of presence, whereby culture becomes the necessary link between nature lost and nature regained. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) Schiller answers Rousseau by arguing that the original totality of human nature, destroyed by art, can be restored only by a higher art. The problem to be addressed is precisely that of the refoundation of society: How is the old society to transform itself? How is the passage from nature to freedom, from a natural polity, based on force, to an ethical polity, based on the law, possible? The Revolution’s attempt to condense the work of a hundred years into the forced union of virtue and terror demonstrated that the direct path of politics cannot be the answer. Modern man and modern society are too fragmented and divided to find in themselves the necessary harmony and unity. The wounds inflicted on modern culture through the division of labor and the abstract analytic understanding mean that the organic life of the polis has been replaced by the alienated subjects of the modern state (letter 6). Hence the circle that confronts Schiller: “The state as presently constituted has caused the evil, while the state as reason conceives it, far from being able to found this better humanity would have itself to be founded on it” (letter 7). The only way that Schiller can envisage to escape this circle is to effect a “total revolution in man’s whole way of feeling” (letter 27). The means to a better humanity and in turn to an ethical state must be sought in aesthetic education. (Kant had indicated the way by seeing in beauty a symbol of moral freedom.)

The two sides of man—feeling and reason, matter and form—are to be reconciled in the play drive, for man is only fully human when he plays (letter 15): “There is no other way to make sensible/sensuous man rational, than first to make him aesthetic” (letter 23). Schiller can thus argue that art is our second creator, the necessary supplement to nature, which yet acts in the same manner as our first creator in that it gives us the means to humanity while leaving the task to our free will (letter 21).

Schiller’s ideal solution to the real contradictions of the French Revolution comes, however, at a high price. The passage from nature to freedom is left suspended. Schiller’s solution requires the displacement of the political problem onto a sociohistorical analysis of the negativities of modernity. The displacement is in fact double: from politics to social and cultural critique, and from the latter, via the Greeks, to art as the way to the most perfect of all artworks: the construction of true political freedom (letter 2). Art points the way because it alone can steer a course between the frightful realm of physical forces and the holy realm of moral law. In freeing us from the constraints of outer and inner necessity, art opens up the realm of freedom through the free play of the imagination in aesthetic illusion.

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or semblance (Schein). However, as critics have observed, aesthetic education for the development of a political state ends in education for the aesthetic state as a harmonious enclave within the existing state. Against the enabling fiction of the social contract that is to effect the passage from nature to culture, Schiller sets the beautiful illusion of art, elevated to the necessary supplement of both nature and morality, since it serves as the sensuous pledge of the invisible ideal of moral freedom (letter 3). The political sublime calls for its beautiful complement. The theatre must take its place beside the forum and the festival. Where the French disciples of Rousseau take from antiquity the example of republican freedom, Rousseau’s German disciples from Schiller to Hegel, from Hölderlin to Schelling, take the vision of beautiful harmony and the dream of the aesthetic state.

The Revolution posed the question of a new civil religion to its French actors and German observers. Both shared a sense of the death of the Christian God and the conviction that Christianity cannot be the religion of a republic of free and equal citizens. For the revolutionaries, politics succeeds religion. It manifests and celebrates the unity of the people and of the nation in public festivals inaugurating a new era. The German observers, repulsed by the twin specters of mob anarchy and state despotism, looked to art to mediate between instincts and reason, and to a new mythology to mediate between public and private life. The highest act of reason—beauty—will act as the unifying and civilizing force that reconciles the teachings of the Enlightenment and the masses. These two faces of civil religion—the political and the aesthetic—are both modeled on antiquity. In the one case the primary reference, exemplified in the paintings of David, is to the sublime civic spirit of the Roman republic; in the other case the primary reference is to the Greek polis as a “living work of art.” Both French revolutionary republicanism and the German aesthetic state (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of “national aestheticism”), exemplified respectively by the public festival and by the public drama, enter in equal measure into the genesis of the idea of the total work of art in that both are inspired by the revolutionary-redemptive dream of social regeneration, projected from the past into the future.

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13. See Josef Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). For the aesthetic state, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s analysis of national aestheticism in Germany in chap. 7 of *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), in particular its three main components: (1) the Greek polis as model; (2) the Greek union of art and politics and religion; (3) organic politics—the state as a living totality and communal work of art.

14. Schelling speaks in 1803 of the festivals, monuments, plays, and public affairs of antiquity as the various branches of the “one general objective and living work of art.” Friedrich Schelling, *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums*, lecture 14, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Abt. 1 (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1856), 5: 352. See also the section “The Living Work of Art” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). The progression from “the abstract work of art” to “the living work of art” signifies the passage from the cult devoted to the gods to the festival of the people.

The German tradition of aesthetic education derives from Rousseau’s diagnosis of the alienation of man in society. The restitution of true human being was conceived in analogy with the integrating and unifying powers of art, which led in turn to a political philosophy predicated on the unity and harmony of the work of art. F. R. Ankersmit has proposed a counterconception of aesthetic politics, which foregrounds the parallels between theatrical and political representation in order to insist on the centrality of the aesthetic dimension to politics. He argues that the unbridgeable aesthetic gap separating the people and the state, the represented and their representatives, is the source of both the legitimacy and the creativity of political power. If this appears close to Schiller’s emphasis on the mediating space of aesthetic semblance, Ankersmit distances himself from the German tradition through his emphasis on the brokenness of the political domain, that is, in his terms the aesthetic as opposed to the mimetic theory of representation: “Beyond the boundaries [of representative democracy] lies the domain of mimetic representation where state and society become inseparable and where political power is inevitably illegitimate.”

Both the Jacobin mimetic and Schiller’s aesthetic conception of politics rest, as we have seen, on idealized images of the ancient world. Confronted by the political failure of the French Revolution, the German thinkers transformed Rousseau’s civil religion into an aesthetic religion and Rousseau’s myth of the Fall into a dialectical philosophy of history, which made the unique fusion of art, religion, and politics in the Greek city-states (and a fortiori the representation of this fusion before the assembled citizens in Athenian tragedy) the model for a new religion, conceived in the light of the revolutionary dawn of a new age as the utopian completion of the Enlightenment. These utopian hopes, shared by Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling, led the young Hegel to reject (like Rousseau) Christianity and (like Schiller) the mechanical state. Hegel rejects Christianity as a private religion incapable of serving the public life of the state and of overcoming the split between the sacred and the secular. The modern mechanical state is rejected because it is devoid of the idea of freedom and hence imimical to the free and equal development of human powers. Both critiques testify to the negative historical consequences of the extinction of the political and moral autonomy of the citizen in the city republic that Hegel saw as the precondition of the spread of Christianity in the ancient world. A new religion, modeled on the ancient polis religion, points beyond Christianity and beyond the existing state. Schiller’s Aesthetic Education, hailed by Hegel as a masterpiece in a letter to Schelling in April 1796, focused his attention on the importance of the aesthetic appeal to the imagination in Greek religion that made its mythical character superior to a historical religion such as Christianity, which

16. F. R. Ankersmit, Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 18, 51. See also his less persuasive distancing of his position from that of Claude Lefort, 154–55.
was necessarily hostile, above all in its reformed Protestant form, to myth.\(^{17}\) All these reflections on the importance of popular religion to the aesthetic education of the people come together in the short fragment known as “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism” (1796–97).

The fragment envisages a recasting of all metaphysics into an ethics, made up of a complete system of ideas, embracing the self, nature, the state, God, and immortality. This system of ideas is to find its unity in the idea of beauty: “I am convinced that the highest act of reason, which, in that it comprises all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that truth and goodness are united like sisters only in beauty.”\(^{18}\) Only in this synthesizing aesthetic guise can the ideas of reason become a popular religion, capable of satisfying reason and the senses, that is, of combining “monotheism of reason and the heart with polytheism of the imagination and art,” and thus of educating in equal measure the philosopher and the people, the enlightened and the unenlightened. The fragment conceives this popular religion in the light of a wholly original idea: “We must have a new mythology; this mythology must, however, stand in the service of ideas, it must become a mythology of reason”:

Mythology must become philosophical, and the people reasonable, and philosophy must become mythological in order to make philosophy sensuous. Then external unity will reign among us. Never again the contemptuous glance, never the blind trembling of the people before its wise men and priests. Only then does equal development of all powers await us, of the individual as well as of all individuals. No power will be suppressed any longer, then general freedom and equality of spirits will reign—A higher spirit sent from heaven must establish this religion among us, it will be the last work of mankind.\(^{19}\)

It is impossible not to see this famous programme as a commentary on the efforts of the French revolutionaries to establish a new religion. If Robespierre’s Supreme Being personified Kant’s postulates of practical reason (God, immortality, freedom), its cold allegory lacked the poetic dimensions of a new mythology of nature. This would be the mission of Hölderlin, whose tragic hero Empedokles is presented precisely as this higher spirit sent from heaven to establish the new religion of man and nature. But before we turn to Hölderlin’s fusion of poetry and philosophy, we need to consider Schelling’s conception of this fusion from the side of philosophy. Poet and philosopher concur, however, in seeing the “last work of mankind” as a total work of art.

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19. Ibid.
In his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) and *Philosophy of Art* (1802–5) Friedrich Schelling consecrates the reunion of art and philosophy, mythology and reason. In the *System* the work of art is declared the true and eternal organon of philosophy: “Art is paramount to the philosopher, precisely because it opens to him, as it were, the holy of holies, where burns in eternal and original unity, as if in a single flame, that which in nature and history is rent asunder, and in life and action, no less than in thought, must forever fly apart. The view of nature which the philosopher frames artificially, is for art the original one.”

Schelling’s metaphor of the flame recalls the beatific vision of the living radiance of divine love at the end of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*:

Substance and accidents, and their modes, became  
As if together fused, all in such wise  
That what I speak of is one simple flame.  
Verily I think I saw with mine own eyes  
The form that knits the whole world, since I taste,  
In telling of it, more abounding bliss.

“The form that knits the whole world” can only be realized, as *The Divine Comedy* exemplifies and Schelling recognizes, through the union of philosophy’s absolute content with the symbolism of mythology:

But now if it is art alone which can succeed in objectifying with universal validity what the philosopher is able to present in a merely subjective fashion, there is one more conclusion to be drawn. Philosophy was born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge, and with it all those sciences it has guided toward perfection; we may thus expect them, on completion, to flow back like so many individual streams into the universal ocean of poetry from which they took their source. Nor is it in general difficult to say what the medium of this return of science to poetry will be, for in mythology such a medium exists, before the occurrence of a breach seemingly beyond repair.

It will be the task of Schelling’s *Philosophy of Art* to deduce from the union of reason and mythology the total work of art to come. Odo Marquard is therefore correct in regarding Schelling’s identification of philosophical system and work of art as the moment of the birth of the idea of the total work of art.

In *Philosophy of Art* Schelling sets out to demonstrate that philosophy and art have the same content—the absolute, such that “philosophy of art is knowledge of the whole in the form or potency of art.” Since art’s knowledge of the whole expresses itself in a “polytheism of the imagination,” the necessary condition and original material of art is given by mythology: in the case of the Greeks as a mythology of nature; in the case of Christianity as a mythology of history. Schelling’s new mythology is to be a synthesis of the ancients and moderns, of nature and history, that will complete and consummate the modern age by bringing the succession of time to a conclusion in a poem of unity, the epic of a new Homer. Here the attractions of symmetry dictate that the once and future Homer epitomize the beginning and the end of history (reinforced by an etymology that reads *homeros* as meaning the “unifier”). More important for our purpose is Schelling’s comparison of ancient drama and modern opera at the end of *Philosophy of Art*:

Let me just observe that the most perfect combination of all the arts, the union of poetry and music through song, of poetry and painting through dance, and they in turn synthesized, provides the most composed theatrical phenomenon such as the ancient drama was, of which there remains for us only a caricature, the opera, which in a higher and nobler style, as regards poetry and the other competing arts, would be most likely to lead us back to the performance of the old drama with music and song.²⁴

As opposed to its operatic caricature, Schelling sees the modern world as possessing one example of the unified work of art, to be found in the *church* not the *theatre*, since the church service is the only public ceremony left to us, and the integral work of art demands a public life involving the participation of the whole people. He is therefore compelled to leave unanswered the question that he had already posed in *The System of Transcendental Idealism*: “But how a new mythology (which cannot be the invention of an individual poet but only of a new generation that represents things as if it were a single poet) can itself arise, is a problem for whose solution we must look to the future destiny of the world and the further course of history alone.”²⁵

**Aesthetic Revolution: Hölderlin**

Friedrich Hölderlin stands in a direct line of descent from Rousseau and Schiller. From Rousseau, the epitome of modern “sentimental” consciousness, he takes the epochal challenge of reconciling nature and culture; from Schiller, the challenge of aesthetic education. His novel in letter form, *Hyperion*, was conceived as

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a continuation of Schiller’s *Letters on Aesthetic Education*. Hölderlin’s own situation as a tutor in the Gontard family in Frankfurt and his love for Susette Gontard while writing the final version of *Hyperion* between 1796 and 1798 directly mirrored that of Rousseau’s tutor in *La nouvelle Héloïse*. In Hölderlin’s epistolary novel, set against the background of the Greek uprising in 1770 against Ottoman rule, the hero recounts the stages of his growth, which follows the path laid out in Rousseau’s *Émile*: education, friendship, and love. Hyperion’s friendship with Alabanda, the revolutionary, and his love for Diotima, his muse, exemplify the opposed paths to the healing of the split between man and nature. The failure of the Greek revolt, which degenerated into barbarous violence, is intended as a critique of French revolutionary violence and thus also of the revolutionary enthusiasm that had led Hölderlin to believe that action offered the shortest way to the realization of his dreams. Hyperion must learn to overcome not only the failure of action but also the death of Diotima before he can become the poet and teacher of his people. The path from Alabanda to Diotima, from revolution to aesthetic education, is presented as the path from Sparta to Athens. Diotima’s love, inspired by the harmony of divinely beautiful nature and its divine human image in ancient Athens, reveals to him his poetic calling. In the letter on Athens at the end of part 1 *Hyperion* presents the art religion of the Greeks as the model for a new mythology:

> The first child of divine Beauty is art. Thus it was among the Athenians. Beauty’s second daughter is religion. Religion is love of Beauty. The wise man loves Beauty herself, eternal, all-embracing Beauty; the people love her children, the gods, who appear to them in multifarious forms. So it was, too, among the Athenians. And without such a love of Beauty, without such a religion, every state is a dry skeleton without life and spirit, all thought and action is a tree without a top, a column whose crown has been cut off…. This beauty of mind and spirit in the Athenians inevitably produced the indispensable sense of freedom.26

The letter ends with a prophecy amid the ruins of Athens of a coming reunion of humanity and nature in one all-embracing divinity. But how is the poet’s word to resonate among his contemporaries? The prophetic vision of a rebirth of human nature is taken back by the letter on Germany, the most unnatural of societies, at the end of part 2, which resumes Rousseau’s and Schiller’s critique of modern civilization. The novel ends with a total separation of poetic ideal and prosaic reality. Like Rousseau, Hyperion, the “hermit in Greece,” chooses the path into solitude and communion with nature.

In Rousseau, Hölderlin saw a modern demigod, who expressed the essence of the age in a single consciousness. Hölderlin’s demigods (Dionysus, Hercules, Christ)

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appear at epochal turning points, the French Revolution in the case of Rousseau and Hölderlin’s other demigod, Napoleon.\footnote{See Jürgen Link, “‘Trauernder Halbgott, den ich meine!’ Hölderlin and Rousseau,” \textit{Lili: Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik} 63 (1986): 86–114. For the historical-political background, see Pierre Bertaux, \textit{Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution} (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969).} Such an epochal turning point, concentrated in the moment of revolutionary change, is the theme of Hölderlin’s unfinished tragedy, \textit{Der Tod des Empedokles} (The Death of Empedocles), the plan for which he drew up in 1797 in the last phase of work on \textit{Hyperion}. The theme is directly tied to the revolutionary hopes that were triggered by the crossing of the Rhine by the French army and the victory at Neuwied in April 1797, which mobilized German reformers and revolutionaries the length of the Rhine from Cologne to southern Germany, encouraged by the establishment of a republic in Switzerland. The Congress at Rastatt (1797–99), called to determine the territorial and political restructuring of the Holy Roman Empire, became the focus for the revolutionaries and reformers. Hölderlin was present at the Congress during November 1798. Through his friend Isaak Sinclair, who was the ambassador of Hessen-Homburg, he came into contact with the leading figures of the Württemberg reform movement. The first of the three versions of \textit{Empedokles} seems to have been written in this period, in the months immediately following Hölderlin’s departure from the Gontard household in September 1798. By June 1799 he was working on the second version and by autumn on the third version of the tragedy, accompanied by two important theoretical essays, “Der Grund zu Empedokles” (The Ground for Empedokles) and “Das untergehende Vaterland” (The Declining Fatherland, also known as Becoming in Dissolution), which shift attention from the dominant role of Empedokles in the first version to a greater emphasis on the historical constellation of which he is the product, a process of objectivation that reflects the disappointment of German revolutionary hopes in the course of 1799.

We are left with the unfinished tragedy, the testimony of Hölderlin’s attempt to marry revolutionary change and a new mythology, for which the historical, half-legendary figure of Empedocles was well suited. He is said to been an ardent democrat and an accomplished orator and to have refused the kingship of his city.\footnote{G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, \textit{The Presocratic Philosophers} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 321.} Hölderlin’s own poetic religion is very close to Empedocles’ conception of \textit{physis} made up of the four elements—Fire, Air, Earth, and Water—which constitute the generative energies of nature and the cosmic cycle, governed by the motive forces of Love and Strife. The role of the poet as teacher, announced in \textit{Hyperion} and projected into the figure of Empedocles, poetic thinker and political reformer, acquires its historical actuality in the context of the French Revolution and the expectation of political change in Germany. We may say that the prospect of a Swabian republic
is the condition of possibility of Hölderlin’s tragedy. Just as the new mythology must create the union of philosophers and the people, so the drama of the polis needs the public space of performance, the living voice of the stage. The unfinished tragedy reflects the absent people and the isolation of the higher spirit sent from heaven to establish the new religion, and repeats the conundrum posed by Schiller: how is the solitary poet to effect the total revolution of man’s whole way of feeling, which is the play’s goal and presupposition? The festival drama for the Swabian republic becomes a festival play in a second sense, which is close to Marc Richir’s interpretation of the utopian moment of the Revolution as a dreamlike moment outside the space and time of history.

The new religion of Hölderlin’s Empedokles is that proclaimed by “The Oldest Systematic Program”: “Never again… the blind trembling of the people before its wise men and priests. Only then does equal development of all human powers await us, of the individual as well as individuals. No power will be suppressed any longer, then general freedom and equality of spirits will reign.” The ruler Kritias and the priest Hermokrates lament the subversive oratory of Empedokles that has intoxicated the people and swept away all customs and restraints of law: “Every day has become a wild celebration / One festival for all and the gods’ / Modest festive days have been merged into one’ (A 191–99). Empedokles has not succeeded, however, in setting the people free. As Kritias observes, the people have now become wholly dependent on their new god and ruler. It is therefore not difficult for the high priest to reassert his hold over the easily swayed citizens and bring them to vote for Empedokles’ banishment. Empedokles accepts his banishment because he is paralyzed by his own guilt. The very source of his inspired powers, his sense of oneness with nature, has become the source of his hubris. In proclaiming himself a god he has become no more than the mirror of the people’s craving for a new god and ruler. Thus when the citizens, regretting their hasty decision, come to his solitary retreat on Mount Etna to offer him the crown, he is finally capable of formulating his new gospel. Refusing the crown, he offers the people in its stead his testament of death and rebirth. Dare to forget the legacy of tradition, law, and custom, the old names of the gods, and raise your newborn eyes to divine nature and recognize the beauty of your own beautiful world, in which each will be like all and a new law shall ratify the communal bond of your new life (A 1497–1530). Then the joyous union of man and the gods, man and nature, will seal the return of Saturn’s golden age.

We can perhaps best understand Hölderlin’s intentions in the light of this utopian vision of total harmony, anticipated in the solitary voice of the prophet (Rousseau) and the poet in search of an audience that will understand them and translate

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29. The line references to the first version (A) are taken from Friedrich Hölderlin, Sämtliche Werke und Briefe, vol. 2, ed. Jochen Schmidt (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassikerverlag, 1994).
spirit into deed. Hence the signal importance of Empedokles’ words to the citizens. Divinely present nature will speak for him when he is gone:

And never will she
Abandon you if once she has approached
For unforgettable is her moment;
And through all times there works
The blessed effects of her heavenly fire. (A 1597–1601)

With these words Empedokles withdraws in the name of the unforgettable moment of nature itself. The meaning of this moment in relation to the play and to the French Revolution is the subject of the two theoretical fragments. The first, “The Ground for Empedokles,” traces the three stages of the reconciliation of man and nature. The initial stage of strife between the opposing forces is overcome by Empedokles but only apparently. It produces in Empedokles, as we have seen, the grandiose delusion of his own divinity, and in the people a corresponding readiness to worship him. Empedokles must transcend his own individual existence in order to achieve through sacrificial death in the fires of Mount Etna a more comprehensive reconciliation of opposites. Hölderlin’s later “Remarks on Antigone” expresses this sublime structure of tragic reconciliation: “The tragic representation has as its premise…that the infinite enthusiasm conceives of itself infinitely, that is, in consciousness which cancels consciousness, separating itself in a sacred manner, and that the god is present, in the figure of death.”

Empedokles’ death seals the new dispensation between man and nature, projected into the vision of a once and future golden age. Shelley, who belongs with Hölderlin to the progeny of Jacobin-democratic romanticism, shares in his poem Hellas (1821) the dream of a “brighter Hellas” to come: “The world’s great age begins anew, / the golden years return.”

Another Athens shall arise,
And to remoter time
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,
The splendour of its prime;
And leave, if naught so bright may live,
All earth can take or Heaven give.
Saturn and Love their long repose
Shall burst, more bright and good
Than all who fell, than One who rose.

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At the opposite pole to Empedokles and Saturn’s golden age stands Jupiter—Hölderlin’s other demigod, Napoleon—the master of the world, who subdues and harnesses the extremes rather than reconciling them: “His virtue is the understanding, his goddess necessity. He is destiny itself, only with the exception that the contending forces inside him are tied to a consciousness, to a point of separation (Scheidepunkt) which... gives them direction.”

The second and third versions of Empedokles rework the play in order to bring out the objective necessity of the hero’s death as the condition of his new gospel attaining historical reality. Empedokles appears in the third version as the son of the “master of time,” the manifestation of the spirit of historical change and renewal that returns the world to the chaos of creative origin, the moment of divinely present nature, which transforms history into nature and nature into history. Such were for Michelet the unforgettable moments of the French Revolution. Such was for Kant the French Revolution, a phenomenon in human history that “cannot be forgotten because it has uncovered a disposition and a capacity for the better in human nature.” This originary, instituting moment, so central to Michelet’s and Richir’s interpretations of the Revolution, is the focus of the second theoretical essay, “The Declining Fatherland” or “Becoming in Dissolution.” Hölderlin argues that in the moment of transition from one form of the world to another, new form the “world of worlds that always is” appears as infinite possibility between end and beginning.

Poised between being and nonbeing, the possible becomes real, and reality ideal. Through the dissolution of the old world the underlying inexhaustibility of relations and forces, the world of all worlds, is sensed. The consciousness of revolutionary rupture can take two forms. Ideal dissolution lies beyond fear, because end and beginning are certain: the dissolving world unites with the infinite feeling of present life (heavenly fire) to give birth to the new. Ideal dissolution is nevertheless tragic for Empedokles because it signifies the union of the infinite and the finite in death. Hölderlin calls its free imitation in art a “frightful yet divine dream.” Real dissolution, by contrast, where neither end nor beginning is known, must appear as nothing—the nothing that Hegel was to term the “fury of disappearance” in relation to the Jacobin Terror.

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33. The parallels with Benjamin’s “dialectic at a standstill” are intriguing. He speaks of the dialectical image as the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics at a standstill. “This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image is therefore a dream image.” Walter Benjamin, Reflections, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 157.

34. “In the state between being and non-being, however, the possible becomes real everywhere, and the real becomes ideal, and in the free imitation of art this is a frightful yet divine dream.” Hölderlin, “Becoming in Dissolution,” in Essays and Letters on Theory, 97. Frank Ankersmit relates sublime historical experience as the consciousness of historical change to the French Revolution and to Rousseau
In the notion of the moment of infinite possibility between being and nonbeing, Hölderlin comes close to Richir’s conception of the sublime in politics, the dream-like experience of death and rebirth, in which the dissolution of all social institutions reveals in the anarchic moment of liberty, equality, and fraternity the sublime community as the symbolic horizon of humanity. It is this image of the sublime community that Empedokles seeks to represent. As Gérard Raulet suggests, the play attempts to stabilize the sublime in the beautiful, that is, to hold fast the moment of infinite possibility in a visionary representation of the “impossible community.”

But can the sublime be mediated through the beautiful? As the three unfinished versions show, the impossible community can only be invoked, as in the critical report of Kritias or in the utopian-poetic perspective of Empedokles. The French Revolution turned to festivals as the key to recapturing and preserving the sublime instituting moment of revolutionary enthusiasm. In like manner Hölderlin ties the impossible community to the return of Saturn’s golden age, to the Saturnalia as the archetypal expression of the liminal moment of an-archy between the old and the new. In the plan for the completion of the third version the play is to end with Saturn’s festival and celebration of the “new world,” as a choral fragment indicates. The introduction of the chorus signals not only the sublation of the hero’s tragic sacrifice in the community but also the dream of transcending the stage in the collective celebration of the new world brought to presence in the festivities. But only a Swabian republic could have given body to this dream of a festival play.

The Destiny of Art: Hegel

Between “The Oldest Systematic Program” and the Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel reversed his estimation of Greek religion and Christianity and placed the beautiful religion of the Greeks in the historical perspective of the progression of the absolute spirit. Beauty must yield its privilege as the highest act of reason to philosophy. Once Hegel had abandoned his hopes for a new mythology he saw his own philosophical system as the true complement and completion of the French Revolution. In recognizing that modern society in the wake of the Enlightenment and the Revolution is too complex to be conceived in the form of a living work of art, Hegel spelled out the exhaustion of the absolute purpose of art and the end of its historical function in the Phenomenology of Spirit and the Lectures on Aesthetics. Art no longer embodies the highest form in which truth realizes itself. What was true for the Greeks—that art was the highest expression of the absolute—is no longer true for

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us, since art’s inherent limit points beyond itself to a higher form of consciousness.\(^\text{37}\) This stage was reached for us in the Reformation.\(^\text{38}\) Hegel accepts the iconoclasm of the Reformation without denying his nostalgia for the *art religion* of the Greeks, whose gods were created by poets and artists. Although this beautiful religion can no longer serve as model and inspiration for a mythology of reason, it remains the paradigm of the absolute purpose of art, against which modern postreligious art is to be measured and determined.

Hegel’s *Aesthetics* provides the historical-philosophical ratification of the separation of art and religion in modernity, whose outcome is the emergence of aesthetic art (or rather of the arts, no longer hierarchized under the perspective of a higher social-religious purpose). Art now finds its content not in the divine but in human being. Moreover, as a consequence of the loss of the absolute purpose of art, art itself divides into its essential but now completed history and its contemporary manifestations. Art, Hegel asserts, has reached its spiritual destination in the philosophy of art, leaving contemporary art to its own human purpose. This means that the art religion of the past is now consigned to the *museum* as the beautiful appearance or semblance from which the divine spirit has fled. The museum thus signifies, as Quatremère lamented, the transformation of nonaesthetic art into aesthetic art for us. This parting of the ways between art, philosophy, and religion, and between religion and politics, in modernity exemplifies the disenchanting effects of the Enlightenment. Hegel insists, however, on the necessity of the historical process that has turned the living work of art into the museum of art history and made the museum the home of the Muses. It is the work of fate, tragic but inescapable, he writes in the *Phenomenology*:

> The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone. The tables of the gods provide no spiritual food and drink, and in his games and festivals man no longer recovers the joyful consciousness of his unity with the divine. The works of the Muse now lack the power of the Spirit, for the Spirit has gained its certainty of itself from the crushing of gods and men. They have become what they are for us now—beautiful fruit already picked from the tree, which a friendly fate has offered us, as a girl might set the fruit before us. It cannot give us the actual life in which they existed, not the tree that bore them, not the earth and the elements which gave them their peculiar character, nor the cycle of the changing seasons that governed the process of their growth. So Fate does not restore their world to us along with the works of antique Art, it gives not the spring and summer of ethical life in which they blossomed and ripened, but only

\(^{37}\) See the section “The Place of Art in Relation to Religion and Philosophy” in the introduction to part 1 of the *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

\(^{38}\) The Reformation as the historical limit of Christian art: Hegel ignores the Counter-Reformation and the art of the baroque as an expression of the total work of art in the age of absolutism.
The veiled recollection of that actual world. Our active enjoyment of them is therefore not the act of divine worship through which our consciousness might come to its perfect truth and fulfillment; it is an external activity.... But, just as the girl who offers us the plucked fruits is more than the Nature which directly provides them... because she sums all this up in a higher mode, in the gleam of her self-conscious eye and in the gesture with which she offers them, so, too, the spirit of the Fate that presents us with these works of art is more than the ethical life and the actual world of their nation, for it is only the inwardizing in us of the Spirit which in them was still [only] outwardly manifested; it is the Spirit of the tragic Fate which gathers all those individual gods and attributes of the [divine] substance into one pantheon, into the Spirit that is conscious of itself as Spirit.39

The museum in Hegel’s perspective becomes the means to the aesthetic education of the modern individual, who needs, in order to become cultivated, to appropriate, to make his own, the cultural legacy of the past. The other, public face of this self-conscious historicism appears in the nineteenth-century cultivation of revivalism, no longer carried by hopes of a renaissance. Revivalism sought to breathe old life into contemporary Christian art and architecture and made stylistic eclecticism—from Gothic churches and railway stations, Renaissance town halls and hotels, to Greek parliaments and stock exchanges—the characteristic face of nineteenth-century cities. Revivalism we might say is the conservative consequence of cultural secularization. Even though this historicism, all too redolent of the museum, has now acquired as “heritage” a historical patina of its own, revivalism demonstrates a reduction of function to facade, that is, an adherence to forms from which life has departed. It was already denounced in 1834 in a rejection of modern, supposedly sacred music and architecture by the music critic Joseph d’Ortigue (whom we shall encounter in the next chapter):

Also, giving the name sacred to the music of M. Cherubini simply on the basis that it was composed on a sacred text is to carry into art a sort of ridiculous and coarse fiction: it is to fall into an empty linguistic trap of the kind that calls the Madeleine a catholic temple without thinking that it is an imitation of the Pantheon and that this monument, solely for display and for art without a religious character, could be today a profane pantheon, tomorrow a parliamentary chamber, the day after a bazaar, anything you like but a church.40

40. Joseph d’Ortigue, review of Cherubini’s “Credo” in La quotidienne, 23 March 1834, reprinted in d’Ortigue, Écrits sur la musique, 1827–1846, ed. Sylvia L’Ecuyer (Paris: Société Française de Musi- cologie, 2003), 390. The Madeleine, begun in 1764 as a neoclassical church, was reconstructed according to Napoleon’s wish that it become a Temple of Glory. After 1815 it was variously projected as an opera house, a museum, a theatre, an assembly room, and a bank before it was completed and opened as a church in 1837.
We must therefore distinguish between this kind of revivalism (for all its earnest and eloquent champions from the Nazarenes to the Pre-Raphaelites and from Pugin and Ruskin to Viollet-le Duc) and a sense of rebirth that was tied to the revolutionary-romantic idea of a refoundation and regeneration of society, espoused by Wagner and Nietzsche.

Between the museum and the avant-garde lies the development of aesthetic art as such, in which art becomes its own end. To aesthetic art corresponds the aesthetic theory of the moderns, which embraced and affirmed the progress of art—as an autonomous sphere with its own internal logic and values—and tied art in quest of its own aesthetic absolute to a progressive dynamic of self-rationalization and self-purification. In the next chapter we explore the impossible dreams of the absolute and the total work of art and examine the close connections between the theory of the avant-garde and the artwork of the future between 1830 and 1848.