Prophets and Precursors:  
Paris 1830–1848

Organic and Critical Epochs: Saint-Simon

If we take Wagner’s manifestos *Art and Revolution* and *The Artwork of the Future*, inspired by the 1848 revolutions, as summing up the will to social and aesthetic re-generation of the whole period from the French Revolution to the year of European revolutions, it is important to add that his role as revolutionary prophet was anticipated and prepared by the social doctrines of the French age of romanticism. Between 1830 and 1848 writers and artists built on the victory of the romantic generation to establish themselves as a social force in their own right. We observe on the one hand the formation of a bohemian counterculture to the bourgeois *juste milieu*, and on the other hand the anointing of artists as an avant-garde of social change and spiritual renewal, launched by the Saint-Simonians. Benjamin Constant’s comparison between the liberty of the ancients and the moderns seems designed to respond to Saint-Simon’s philosophy of history. Constant argued that by taking the ancient polis as his sole model for the regeneration of society, Rousseau’s “sublime genius, animated by the purest love of liberty,” had paved the way for the tyranny of the French Revolution. To this privileging of collective authority and

power Constant opposed the modern idea of liberty, rooted in the rights of the individual and guaranteed by political liberty.² Constant’s comparison brings out the split between totalizing and pluralizing conceptions that lay behind the contending interpretations of postrevolutionary society. At stake was the legacy of the Enlightenment and of the Revolution. The consolidation of bourgeois society in the wake of the July revolution had reinforced widespread perceptions of a moral vacuum left by the decay of established religion and the triumph of the commercial spirit. Was contemporary society defined by the critical spirit of analysis and justified by the ideal of liberty, or was it the case, as romantics, neo-Catholics, and scientific utopians alike maintained, that the future of society could be assured only by a shared faith that would restore social cohesion? The republican historians Michelet and Edgar Quinet regarded the Enlightenment as initiating the last religious stage of humanity’s progress, in which democracy would accomplish the New Testament and realize the spirit of Christianity.³ The neo-Catholic Pierre-Simon Ballanche, by contrast, registered the imminent demise of the Enlightenment: “The critical force of the eighteenth century is reaching its end; the nineteenth century is on the point of grasping the organizing force.” And yet Ballanche seems to sum up the faith of the romantic age across the spectrum of ideological positions when he wrote that mankind “is marching towards the distant horizon, unknown sanctuary of an unknown synthesis, the synthesis that will govern art, poetry, science, the law.”⁴ Faith in the future, in the religion of humanity, is the self-authorizing and self-consecrating reference point of all positions. It is the common faith of the new intellectual class, the new “spiritual corporation,” called to found and guide the new society. And here, as Paul Bénichou stresses, “it is not by chance that all the doctrines accord a specially high function to the Poet and Artist; they wish to add to their credit the halo of the Beautiful; Poetry and Art are the only heaven of the new world, the sole mystical crown of the spirit in the beginning century.” And, Bénichou adds, all such visions of synthesis could only be conceived aesthetically: “Every enterprise aiming to found spiritual values appropriate to the nineteenth century arrived here, whatever different routes they took.”⁵

³. Fustel de Coulanges in the introduction to The Ancient City (1864) warns against the dangers of the imitation of the ancients: “Having imperfectly observed the institutions of the ancient city, men have dreamed of reviving them among us. They have deceived themselves about the liberty of the ancients, and on this very account liberty among the moderns has been put at peril. The last eighty years have clearly shown that one of the great difficulties which impede the march of modern society is the habit which it has of always keeping Greek and Roman antiquity before its eyes.” Fustel de Coulanges, The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, n.d.), 11.
⁵. Quoted in Bénichou, Le temps des prophètes, 332.
Art, science, and politics could scarcely aspire to their role as the inheritors of religion without the support of philosophies of history, themselves seeking to supersede the Christian theology of history with their own temporal dramas of salvation, whose site is history—or rather the History composed of the grand narratives of progress or return in relation to a deficient present. Saint-Simon’s famous distinction between organic and critical epochs captured both the historicist consciousness of the time and the longing for a new synthesis. His philosophy of history united romantic and enlightenment, religious and scientific perspectives by combining a cyclic pattern—the alternation of organic and critical epochs—with an overall progressive telos, which gives the present its high meaning and purpose. A new organic age is being born from the final crisis of European feudalism in the French Revolution, preceded by the spread of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the triumph of Newton’s mechanical theory of the universe. The new postfeudal, industrial epoch will find expression in a civil religion of love, the new Christianity, which much concerned Saint-Simon in his final years. Convinced that religion cannot disappear, that it can only transform itself, Saint-Simon looked to artists to promote the sentiments of love and sympathy that are to form the universal bond of industrial society and realize the integration of private interests into the general interest of society as a whole. Artists are thus placed by Saint-Simon at the head of an “administrative elite trinity consisting of artists, scientists and industrialists—artisans. In so doing, he gave rise to the conceptions both of an artistic avant-garde and of a social vanguard—conceptions with enormous importance for the history of art and social radicalism alike.”

For the Saint-Simonians, humanity is a great collective being whose organs are the arts, the sciences, and industry. In Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles, published in 1825 in the last year of Saint-Simon’s life, there is a dialogue between an artist and a scientist postulating an organic harmony between the arts and the sciences that will give back to the arts what they now lack, the energizing inspiration of a “common drive and a general idea”: “What a beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising in society a...
positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the van of all intellectual faculties, in the epoch of their greatest development! This is the duty of artists, this is their mission.”

This vision of an artistic avant-garde was the work not of the master but of one of his new disciples, the writer Léon Halévy, brother of the better-known composer Fromental Halévy. This was in fact not the last essay of Saint-Simon, but the first of the Saint-Simonians. It crystallized a whole complex of ideas concerning social actors and forces, set in train by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution:

i. Artists form part of a wider social vanguard, through which art recovers its social function.

ii. This social function is predicated on a new priesthood of artists and intellectuals.

iii. The task of this new priesthood is to articulate and express holistic visions of social change, underpinned and legitimized through speculative philosophies of history.

“The poet is the divine singer, placed at the head of society to serve man as interpreter, to give him laws, to reveal to him the joys of the future, to sustain and stimulate his onward march.”

In Saint-Simon’s historical construction the critical epoch of transition and the “critical” role of the avant-garde belong together. The “critical” link between art and religion is spelled out in The Doctrine of Saint-Simon: “In organic epochs, the highest manifestation of sentiments carries the name of cult…; in critical epochs it takes that of fine arts, an expression which contains the same idea of critique in relation to that of cult, as the term philosophy does in relation to that of religion.” In organic eras, society is unified by a single set of values, and religion constitutes the synthesis of all human activity, whereas critical ages such as the Roman Empire and Europe since the Reformation, born from the destruction of the preceding organic era, are unstable and torn by conflict. The critical relation of art to religion defines the place and function of art in modern society: its task is to overcome individualism and egoism, but to do this “the true artist needs a chorus which will repeat his songs and be receptive to his soul when it pours out.” Art’s intermediary spiritual authority, born of the decadence of religion, points beyond itself—art’s task is to prepare for its own sublation in a coming organic society, and the transformation of the critical doctrine of humanity’s progress into a new and final religion. No doubt the promise of a chorus, of a community and communal activity, drew artists

10. Quoted in Egbert, Social Radicalism and the Arts, 122.


12. Iggers, Doctrine of Saint-Simon, Session 1, 18.

13. Ibid., Session 3, 55–56.

14. Ibid., Session 1, 18, 20.
and especially musicians to the Saint-Simonians’ vision of a new society. Fromental Halévy, Liszt, Mendelssohn, and Berlioz were all attracted, but only one composer associated himself closely with the Ménilmontant community, Félicien David. 15

There is thus from the beginning a paradox built into the very idea of the vanguard role of art, which runs through the whole period of European modernism. Whether the goal of the avant-garde is conceived as the reunion of art and religion or of art and politics or of art and life, art attains self-realization through its (self-sacrificial) transformation into faith or action. Perhaps the liberals were the only group to really recognize the right of artists to autonomy. Conversely, those who had the highest expectations of the social function of art tended to decry the cultivation of “art for art’s sake” as a betrayal of art’s spiritual power. The observation of the Saint-Simonian Pierre Leroux in 1831 is particularly telling: “Woe betide the artist, who, seeing his undecided age hovering between the past and the future, without destiny, tears himself apart in the same way, and finishes by having no other social religion than the cult of art, the religion of art!”16 The idea of the avant-garde thus carried with it the promise of the reintegration of art and the artist into a larger totality that was the very antithesis of the Hegelian destiny of art. But what did this synthesis of art and the religion of man and society signify? Did it mean the regeneration or the annexation of art? The artists themselves, as opposed to doctrinaires, were less attracted to collaboration. However tempting the prospect of reintegration into a greater social whole, the romantic generation evidently sensed the dangers of co-option in the service of the religion of the future, which claimed total domination over the temporal realm. As The Doctrine of Saint-Simon stated, the religion of the future will be greater and more powerful than all those of the past; it will be the synthesis of all conceptions of mankind and of all modes of being: “Not only will it dominate the political order, but the political will be totally a religious institution.”17 It is hardly surprising that Georg Iggers and Bénichou conclude that Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, founder of positivism and the science of sociology, surrendered to the logic of their historical predictions and to the “totalitarian epistemology” of their respective systems, in proclaiming themselves messiahs and the true inheritors of the Enlightenment.18 The Saint-Simonians could not decide whether the vanguard artist was prophet and leader or valuable auxiliary. Comte is similarly ambivalent: the role he allots to aesthetic genius in the

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17. See Iggers, Doctrine of Saint-Simon, Session 13, 203.
final cult of the positivist church presupposes the extirpation of poetic pride and a complete self-reformation of the artist:

Science cannot sufficiently determine the nature and the destiny of the new Supreme-Being [Comte’s hypostasis of humanity] to satisfy the needs of a cult, whose object must be clearly conceived if it is to be loved without effort and served with ardor. It is the task of aesthetic genius to fill in this respect the inevitable gaps left by scientific genius…. Thus the fundamental synthesis that will inaugurate the final cult belongs more to art than to science, which can only furnish it with an indispensable basis.19

The form of “the final cult” exercised the imaginations of the scientific utopians. In his New Christianity (1825) Saint-Simon envisaged the combination of all the resources of the fine arts. The preacher is to arouse both fear and trembling, and hope; poets will provide poems to be recited by the congregation; musicians will reinforce the poets’ words by penetrating to the depths of the soul; painters and sculptors will beautify the temple; architects will provide the ideal setting for the cult’s festivals of hope and of remembrance, the latter intended to celebrate the progress of the present in relation to the past. With his emphasis on the central role of festivals, Saint-Simon’s religion of industrial society can be seen as a modernizing continuation of Robespierre’s civil religion. Appropriately, Rouget de Lisle, the composer of “The Marseillaise,” composed the “Premier Chant des Industriels” for Saint-Simon in 1821.20 In his Letters to a Citizen of Geneva (1802) Saint-Simon had already proposed building a temple to Newton, symbolizing the replacement of Christianity by the new religion of science, an idea clearly inspired by Étienne-Louis Boullée’s plan for a cenotaph for Newton (Boullée’s drawings provide a splendid example of the sublime in architecture). The germ of the idea of the avant-garde is already evident in Saint-Simon’s proposal that twenty-one of the foremost scientists and artists should collaborate in the design and construction of the temple, intended to serve as a mausoleum to Newton’s services to humanity and as the setting for “majestic and brilliant spectacles.” Adolphe Garnier, writing in the Saint-Simonian journal Le producteur in 1825 and 1826, tied the renewal of the arts to a new faith and anticipated in similar fashion grandiose festivals, comparable to those of the Jewish Passover, the Olympic Games, and the Christian church, in a reconstructed society.21 In his brochure Aux artistes (1831) Émile Barrault declares, with due acknowledgment to Rousseau, that the art of the coming organic age will be the festival.22 In a bow to Plato and Rousseau, Comte banishes theatre from his ideal

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state: “It is for Positivism finally to suppress the theatre, as an institution at once irrational and immoral; and it will do so by reorganizing the common education, and by founding, by sociolatry, a system of festivals calculated to bring unprofitable satisfactions into contempt.”23

**Musical Palingenesis: Mazzini and Balzac**

Both Joseph d’Ortigue’s “Palingénésie musicale” (1833) and Guiseppe Mazzini’s “Filosofia della musica” (1836) present musical variations on Saint-Simon’s alternation of critical and organic epochs and on the triadic pattern of history—paradise, paradise lost, and paradise regained—so beloved of the romantics. D’Ortigue (1802–66), a member of the neo-Catholic movement and follower of Félicité Robert de Lamennais, took the idea of palingenesis from Ballanche. A writer on music, d’Ortigue expounded the idea of an organic connection between art and the social structure. He replaced Saint-Simon’s conceptual pair by the contrast between harmonic epochs of coincidence, in which the unity of the arts is attained, and epochs of separation, in which the consciousness of this unity disappears. In an age of separation like the present, d’Ortigue argues, the artist has a special role to play. The regeneration of music through the reunion of the arts will point the way to a coming restoration of belief. The situation of contemporary art and its synthesizing task is explained and justified through recourse to a triadic schema of history and its three distinct epochs:

In the first, belief dominates, considered as supreme law; in the second, dogma retreats before the shock of various social influences in revolt against it; finally, in the third, the individual, vainly seeking for common beliefs, a social bond, gathers as it were all these existing or dispersed forces in order to concentrate them in himself, and rules alone until the time when beliefs of themselves again take the place they should occupy, and return to the rank that belongs to them in the universal balance.24

In terms of musical history, the first epoch (Catholicism) comprises church music up to Palestrina, the second epoch (Reformation) secular opera from Monteverdi to Rossini, and the third epoch (regeneration) announces itself in German instrumental music from Haydn to Beethoven. Instrumental music unites the sacred polyphony of the first epoch and the profane monody of the second in the fire of individual creation:

In the Catholic centuries, all music is religious, even that composed on profane subjects. In the centuries of skepticism, all music is profane, even that composed on sacred

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subjects. And following this palingenetic march we observe in Germany instrumental music taking possession of dramatic music and reuniting in Beethoven these two inspirations with individual inspiration in order to form finally a great and complete system that will be the work of regeneration to come.  

Six years after Beethoven’s death d’Ortigue has no doubt as to the composer’s significance. He declares that Beethoven unites in one person poet, historian, and prophet: the poet, who has realized artistic freedom; the historian, who has absorbed and united the religious and secular inspirations of the past; and the prophet, whose music amounts to a religious revelation. Even more, the passion of this lonely genius, who draws his spiritual profundity from the depths of his isolation, partakes of the Passion of Christ: his string quartets unfold the work of sacrifice and redemption.  

Nevertheless, Beethoven is only the prophet of the regeneration to come, the total work of art that will be born from a synthesis of opera and instrumental music. The fusion of the vocal system of Rossini and of the instrumental system as developed by Beethoven will give rise to a great lyrical-dramatic system—a direct anticipation of Wagner’s vision of the sublation of Rossini’s “absolute melody” and of Beethoven’s “absolute music” in the artwork of the future. D’Ortigue believes, however, that it will take a century before the synthesis to come surpasses Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (Wagner’s point of departure). For the present, d’Ortigue hails Giacomo Meyerbeer’s opera Robert le diable (1831) for its marriage of German instrumental music and Italian song.

Mazzini concurs with d’Ortigue’s recognition of the revolution effected by Meyerbeer’s “musical drama.” In a note added in 1867 to his “Filosofia della musica,” published in L’Italiano in Paris in 1836, Mazzini confirms his earlier estimation of Meyerbeer by dubbing him “the precursor spirit to the High Priest of the music of

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25. Joseph d’Ortigue, “Palingénésie musicale,” L’artiste, 8 and 15 December 1833, quoted in Bzozoka, Die Idee des Gesamtkunstwerks, 156. This two-part article, influenced by Pierre-Simon Ballanche’s Palingénésie sociale (Paris, 1829), also appeared in La France catholique, November 1833. Unfortunately it is not reprinted in Joseph d’Ortigue, Écrits sur la musique, 1827–1846, ed. Sylvia L’Ecuyer (Paris: Société Française de Musicologie, 2003), which includes a survey of the life and writings of d’Ortigue, pp. 11–207.

26. The artist as messiah: this religion of art is tied to a critical construction of contemporary history in which the work of art acquires a prophetic quality. Cf. a century later Adorno’s essay “Schönberg or Progress” (1939), in which Schönberg’s musical sacrifice is compared to that of Christ: “The shocks of incomprehension, emitted by artistic technique in the age of its meaninglessness, undergo a sudden change. They illuminate the meaningless world. Modern music sacrifices itself to this effort. It has taken upon itself all the darkness and guilt of the world.” Theodor W. Adorno, Philosophy of Modern Music, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 133.


the future.” That Meyerbeer has not been replaced in 1867 by Verdi or by Wagner is strange. Clearly Mazzini remains faithful to his original judgment that he and his generation are “destined only to foresee but never to contemplate the regeneration of Art and Genius” (49). For all his belief in the progress of humanity, Mazzini regards his age as an age of transition “between a synthesis consumed, and a synthesis yet to be evolved” (3). Like Saint-Simon or d’Ortigue, he posits a necessary correlation between the arts and society. The present critical epoch is characterized above all by the lack of religious faith. Unlike the Greeks, we have no “living religion”; unlike them, we have lost the “instinct for unity, which is the secret of genius, the soul of all great things” (14). And yet the “human intellect thirsts for unity in all things” (4). Mazzini is thus impelled to look beyond romanticism, which he characterizes as essentially a “theory of transition,” to a more comprehensive vision of the once and future union of art and religion: “What! Shall an entire synthesis, a whole epoch, a Religion be sculptured in stone; shall architecture thus sum up the ruling thought of eighteen hundred centuries in a cathedral, and music be unequal to the task?”

Mazzini’s “Philosophy of Music” is directed to answering this question. However, he can only answer this question by repeating the displacement of religion by art (as with d’Ortigue) and of politics by art (as with Schiller)—that is to say, by reversing the organic bond between art and society. As Mazzini knows, the musical synthesis to come will not be the crowning expression of a new organic epoch but only its anticipation and preparation. The high priest of the music of the future will be himself a precursor, and Mazzini his prophet. Aesthetic illusion must satisfy the thirst for unity in the wilderness. Is this a utopia? Mazzini asks. No, a genius comparable to Dante will arise: “The ways of genius are hidden, like the ways of Deity, by whom it is inspired. But criticism is bound to foretell his coming” (35). Mazzini’s philosophy of music is thus very consciously the product of a critical epoch. It echoes Hegel in its assertion that the conception that formerly gave music life is exhausted, and it is a variation on Schelling in declaring music to be the organon of philosophy: “the religion of an entire world of which Poetry is only the highest philosophy” (17). Mazzini transposes Saint-Simon’s contrasting epochs into the two primary elements of history: Man and Humanity, the individual idea and the social idea, whose slowly converging strife determines the subject matter of history and defines the poles between which thought and art oscillate. The two schools of thought, founded on analysis and synthesis respectively, have consumed


30. Gaetano Salvemini, Mazzini (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), 85, characterizes the religious, political, and social theories of Mazzini as a utopian theocratic system, made up of a fusion of Dante’s De monarchia, Rousseau’s Social Contract, and the doctrine of Saint-Simon.
their energies in contestation, the one sinking of necessity into materialism, the other soaring of necessity into mysticism (20). In music these two schools find their counterparts in melody and harmony: “The first [melody] represents the individual idea; the second [harmony] the social idea; and in the perfect union of these two fundamental terms of all Music, and the consecration of this union to a sublime intent, a holy mission, lies the true secret of the art, and the conception of that European school of Music which—consciously or unconsciously—we all invoke” (21). The European school will unite the contribution of Italy, the home of melody, and that of Germany, the home of harmony. In the Italian school “man alone is represented; man without God.” In the German school “God is there, but without man” (29). Italian music has reached its limit, its summation, exhaustion, and conclusion with Rossini. German music, by contrast, is the music of preparation: “It is profoundly religious, yet with a religion that has no symbol, and therefore no active faith translated into deeds, no martyrdom, no victory” (31).

In Mazzini’s deduction of the art of the future, formal synthesis (the fusion of melody and harmony) is the condition of art’s substantive mission, the espousal of the progressive cause of humanity, just as the marriage of the individual and the social idea is the condition of the social drama to come. Mazzini dismisses the degenerate practices of contemporary opera, which have reduced the divine art of music to a mere amusement, a compendium of cheap effects and a “thousand secondary impressions,” devoid of all unity of purpose and conception. Opera is the partial work of art par excellence, a nameless thing of unrelated parts, which reflects the divorce of art from society and the atheism of art for art’s sake. But, as we have seen from his note of 1867, Mazzini did not transcend the horizon of Meyerbeer and the 1830s. There is no recognition that his prophetic essay pointed to Wagner’s own programme and practice. In his musical novella, written in Paris in 1840, A Pilgrimage to Beethoven, Wagner has Beethoven speak of the Ninth Symphony as a combination of symphonic music and the voice, uniting elemental feelings (the orchestra, harmony) and individual emotion in song and melody.  

Balzac’s novella Gambara (1837) simultaneously espouses and reverses Mazzini’s high-flown expectations. The story is Balzac’s own contribution to the quarrel between the partisans of Rossini and Meyerbeer. It forms the centerpiece of the trilogy of stories devoted to art and the artist, The Unknown Masterpiece (1831), Gambara, and Massimilla Doni, written in conjunction with Gambara in 1837 but not published until 1839, brought together in the Études philosophiques of La comédie humaine. As we have seen, Rossini and Meyerbeer represent the alternatives

31. In Opera and Drama (1851) Wagner treats Rossini as the end of opera and announces the alliance of melody and harmony, voice and orchestra, in the music drama, the successor to and sublation of southern opera and northern drama. Particularly striking is Mazzini’s anticipation of the Wagnerian leitmotif in his call for the individualization of the figures through musical themes as an essential contribution to dramatic unity.
of Italian melody and German harmony, vocal and instrumental music, sensations and ideas. Like Mazzini, Balzac’s interest is the progress of music beyond this opposition of national schools. Gambara, set in Paris, embraces the cause of Meyerbeer, whereas Massimilla Doni, set in Venice, takes the side of Rossini. Both stories deconstruct the forced alternatives of the heated querelle. In the one, Robert le diable is praised for its happy union of harmony and melody, while in the other, Rossini’s Moïse en Égypte is recognized as the precursor of Meyerbeer’s opera. Gambara, “the unknown Orpheus of modern music,” believes he can emulate and surpass the most advanced music of the time, only to demonstrate, like the painter Frenhofer in The Unknown Masterpiece, the limits of the language of music when he tries to express the ideal.

Hans Belting has taken Balzac’s Unknown Masterpiece as the parable of modern painting’s self-destructive quest “to make art itself visible in an authoritative and definitive epiphany.” In his arresting title The Invisible Masterpiece Belting captures the paradox that he sees at the heart of modern art. Modern art shared the utopian spirit of modernity and thus “always transgressed or transcended its own limits towards the idea of absolute art or of an art that was to appear at some later date.” The idea of absolute art was the fata morgana that drove artistic production and just as persistently eluded it, since it imposed on the individual artwork the impossible burden of demonstrating a conception of art with general validity. It has not been recognized, however, that Gambara presents in equally striking fashion the idea of the total work as opposed to the absolute work of art. If the one belongs in the museum, which Belting calls the space in which modern culture could reflect on itself, the space, that is, of the self-reflective work of art on itself, the total work belongs to the space of performance beyond the museum. Standing outside the confining and defining space of the museum, the total work of art represented modernism’s quest for totality, the other, complementary myth of the quest to transcend the limits of art.

Balzac described the quest for the ideal in art, the governing idea of his trilogy, as the meeting of the infinitude of human passions and the infinite mystery of the world. It is a tragic encounter. The creative principle’s quest for the ideal signifies

32. In his “Letters on the French Stage” in 1837 Heine joins in the debate by giving a directly political-revolutionary reading of Meyerbeer’s operas. He writes that “the melodies dissolve, indeed drown in the stream of the harmonic mass, just as the particular feelings of individuals disappear in the total emotion of a whole people, and our soul throws itself willingly into these harmonic currents when it is seized by the sufferings and joys of humanity as a whole and takes a stand on the great social questions.” Heinrich Heine, “Über die französischen Bühnen,” in Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe, vol. 12/1, ed. Manfred Windfuhr (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1980), 275.
35. Belting, Invisible Masterpiece, 8.
the destruction of the work and the suicide of art (10: 393–94). This tragic contradiction is the key to Frenhofer’s impossible dream and to Gambara’s greatness and madness. Rapt in the inner world of his divine inspiration, Gambara is rebuffed and ridiculed by the world: “My music is beautiful, but when music advances from sensation to the idea, only geniuses can be the audience for they alone have the power to develop it. My misfortune comes from having heard the concerts of angels and from having believed that human beings could comprehend them” (10: 516). Balzac presents the tragic gulf between idea and realization, which dictates the grotesque juxtaposition of genius and madness in the artist and of celestial harmonies and stupefying cacophony in his music, from three angles: the theory, realization, and execution of the music of the future. Gambara is persuaded that the music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, based on mathematics, will be surpassed by a higher music, based on the laws of nature. Through his dual training as a composer and instrument maker (he comes from Cremona), Gambara has learned the laws of the spiritual and the material construction of music and grasped that the combined powers of art and science destine music to become the greatest of the arts (10: 479). His operatic trilogy seeks to capture the eternal music of the universe in a correspondingly grandiose subject: the life of nations at their highest pitch. His operatic trilogy, *Mahomet, The Martyrs*, and *Jerusalem Delivered*, sets out to encompass—in its depiction of the struggle between the God of the Occident and the God of the Orient—the totality of emotions, human and divine, in the life of man and nations. Gambara asserts the superiority of his operas over Beethoven’s symphonies because they combine all the riches of melody and harmony, that is, all the resources of the orchestra and the voice. Deprived of all access to an orchestra and opera company, Gambara is obsessed by his conviction that his science of music (Balzac’s own theory, which he believed explained E. T. A. Hoffmann’s theory of synaesthesia) and the adequate execution of his music demand new musical instruments. His invention and construction of the panharmonicon, the “bizarre instrument” with a hundred voices, designed to replace the whole orchestra, becomes the material image of his celestial music. Uniting in itself orchestral harmony and vocal melody, it becomes the medium of the composer’s conception of the total work of art as universal harmony.36 But when he seeks to demonstrate his “impossible music,” the results are absolutely paradoxical: in a state of creative ecstasy, Gambara produces a deafening cacophony (probably a reminiscence of the deaf Beethoven at the piano), whereas in a state of higher “sobriety,” induced by alcohol, he produces music worthy of angels, momentarily capable of entrancing his audience.

36. See the introduction to *Gambara* by René Guise in Balzac, *La comédie humaine*, 10: 451–52. Beethoven’s *Wellington’s Victory* (1813) was composed for the panharmonicon, invented by his friend Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, best known as the inventor of the metronome. Mälzel’s panharmonicon was a “giant mechanical orchestral machine, run by air pressure and incorporating flutes, trumpets, drums, cymbals, triangles, strings struck by hammers [violins, cellos], and clarinets.” *Mechanical Music Digest, Archives* (August 1998), www.mmdigest.com.
The Musical City: Berlioz

A narrative framework of betrayed love and revenge adds a hideous discord to the description of the harmonious city presented in “Euphonia, or the Musical Town, a Tale of the Future,” first published (like Gambara) in the Gazette musicale in 1844, and later forming the twenty-fifth and concluding evening of Hector Berlioz’s Evenings in the Orchestra. Leaving the narrative to one side for a moment, the description of the utopian city of harmony has elicited diverging responses from critics. Its enumeration of the ideal conditions for rehearsal and performance before an ideal audience is generally seen as an understandable if somewhat naive wish-list on the part of a frustrated composer and conductor. That Berlioz harbored such dreams is evident from a letter he wrote to Spontini in 1841, in which he outlined his ideas for a European musical center: “a theatre, a lyric Pantheon, exclusively devoted to the performance of monumental masterpieces.” “They would be produced with the care and grandeur they deserve, and they would be listened to on the solemn festal days of art by audiences at once receptive and intelligent.”37 In the last chapter of his Treatise on Orchestration, completed in 1842, Berlioz envisages the effects made possible by a gigantic festival orchestra combined with voices. Berlioz died before the opening of Bayreuth in 1873 and could scarcely have imagined that his idea of the musical festival would spawn such a European progeny.38 The irony is even greater if we consider that Euphonia is meant to embody the antithesis to the culture industry of Berlioz’s time, projected five hundred years into the future, where we learn that in Italy, the home of opera, opera composers have been replaced by operatore, “poor devils who, for a few silver pieces, spend their days in libraries, making a compilation of the arias, duets, choruses and ensemble pieces of all the different composers and ages.”39 Needless to say, the opera-house managers have the last word. In such a world, Euphonia represents “only a tiny fragment of the multitude lost in the mass of the civilized nations” (235).

Can we, however, take this shining beacon of musical culture at its own estimation? Berlioz’s vision of a magnificent festival of the religion of art, supported by a disciplined ensemble of performers wholly organized and dedicated to its execution, is confirmed in the discussion of Euphonia in Evenings in the Orchestra: “Our art, which is essentially complex, depends on numerous agents to exert its full power. To give them the unity of action which is indispensable, authority, strong and absolute authority is needed” (272). Berlioz’s city of art is made in the image of

39. Berlioz, Evenings in the Orchestra, 232–33. Parenthetical page references in the text refer to this work.
Sparta, not Athens. And yet all is not as it seems. The account given by the composer Shetland to his unhappy colleague Xilef (Felix reversed) of the “eminently grandiose and epic ceremony” that forms part of Euphonia’s Gluck festival needs to be read on two levels. On one level we register the tremendous effect produced by Shetland’s hymn sung by six thousand voices in the circus, “which I had accompanied only by a hundred clarinet and saxophone families, a hundred flute families, four hundred cellos, and three hundred harps” (Berlioz’s imaginary “festival orchestra” in the *Treatise on Orchestration*, made up of 467 instrumentalists, includes a mere thirty harps and thirty pianos). We follow the dramatic scene in which the statue of Gluck is crowned by the beautiful Nadira. Inspired by the occasion, her rendering of an aria from Gluck’s *Alcestis* calls forth rapturous applause:

Nadira, swaying at first, drew herself up at the sound of this clamorous harmony, and raised her arms like an ancient priestess. Radiant with admiration, joy, beauty, and love, she laid the wreath on the powerful head of the Olympian Gluck. Then, inspired in my turn by this stately scene, and to allay the enthusiasm which was growing frenzied and perhaps already making me jealous, I gave the signal for the *Alcestis* march. All kneeling, with Euphonian fervour, we saluted the supreme master with his religious chant. (251)

On another level, we must register in this frenzied enthusiasm a merging of art and religion, which makes the grandiose ceremony an act of communal fusion at the same time as it unfolds as a scene from grand opera. Nadira is not an ancient priestess but a “frivolous Viennese singer.” Shetland’s orchestration of tremendous effects appears not only as a self-satirical dig at Berlioz’s own cultivation of grand and sublime effects but equally as a foretaste of the megalomaniac will to power of the composer-conductor as the master of mass ceremonies.⁴⁰

Euphonia is a town of twelve thousand inhabitants in the Harz Mountains in Germany under the patronage of the German emperor. “It goes without saying that Euphonia’s form of government is military despotism. Hence the perfect order which reigns in all forms of study, and the wonderful artistic results which this has made possible” (254). The whole purpose of this “vast academy of music” lies in its solemn artistic festivals, attended annually by twenty thousand privileged visitors, selected by the minister for fine arts: “A circus, roughly similar to the circuses of ancient Greece and Rome, but built much better acoustically, is devoted to these monumental performances. It can hold an audience of twenty thousand on one side and ten thousand performers on the other.” All these performers are directed by the composer, who listens from the top of the amphitheater. “When he feels

himself absolutely master of this huge, intelligent instrument,” he ascends the chief rostrum to conduct, communicating his feelings and his commands to each of the performers through an ingenious device. “They respond as swiftly as the hammers of a piano…and the maestro can truthfully claim to play the orchestra” (258). The *Treatise on Orchestration* ends with an evocation of the “incalculable melodic power” and unheard-of “force of penetration” waiting to be drawn forth from this “huge, intelligent instrument”:

Its repose would be as majestic as the ocean’s sleep; its agitations would be reminiscent of a tropical storm, its explosions would evoke the cries of volcanoes, it would re-create the moaning, the murmuring, the mysterious noises of virgin forests, the clamouring, the prayers, the triumphal and mourning songs of a people with an expansive soul, an ardent heart, impetuous passions; its silence would impose fear by its solemnity; and the most rebellious organizations would shudder upon seeing the roaring growth of its *crescendo*, like an immense and sublime conflagration!\(^\text{41}\)

Commenting on Berlioz’s “people with an expansive soul,” Pierre Boulez observes that it calls to mind Rousseau, Robespierre, and the Champs de Mars, just as Berlioz’s imaginary orchestra reveals the underlying phantasm of the total work of art: “One is tempted to say that Berlioz’s written compositions make up only the scattered pieces of a Great Opus that escaped him—an Opus that resembles that definitive *Livre* towards which Mallarmé was working.”\(^\text{42}\)

Gambara’s *panharmonicon* with its hundred voices is a poor substitute for Euphonia’s assembled forces of ten thousand or even for Euphonia’s huge piano, dubbed the piano-orchestra because it can rival an orchestra of a hundred players. This piano, and a “delightful steel summer house,” constructed by the same celebrated mechanician, form the instruments of Xilef’s revenge on Nadira for her betrayal of his and Shetland’s love. As Shetland with ever-growing passion draws a tempest of sounds from the piano-orchestra to accompany at a distance the dancers led by Nadira, Xilef operates the powerful mechanism that causes the walls of the summer house to contract and crush the dancers to the “cracking noise of bones breaking and skulls bursting open” (266). This gruesome mechanical revenge, a grotesque mechanical parody of the ancient Greek legend, reduces Euphonia to silence. The parallel between the “ingenious device” that relays the conductor’s will to the performers and the “powerful mechanism” that sets the steel house in motion points to the transmission of power as the mechanism at the heart of Euphonia’s military despotism. The artwork of the future has as its condition a totally regulated society


in which the individual is subsumed in the collective. Berlioz’s negative deduction of the society of the future from the festival of the future reverses the assumptions and illusions of d’Ortigue and of Mazzini, who make the artwork to come the aesthetic pledge of a future social synthesis.\textsuperscript{43} The totalitarian closure of Berlioz’s musical utopia is both dissolved and reinforced by the gruesome conclusion. On the one hand, it is individual passion that shatters the organized harmony of Euphonia. On the other hand, Xilef’s vengeance reveals the logic of annihilation, inherent in the demand for complete power in the name of art and manifested in the will to the total work as destruction.

Berlioz also has the futuristic fusion of powerful mechanisms and utopia in his sights. Its symbol in Euphonia is the “huge organ placed on top of a tower which dominates all the buildings of the town” (256). This steam-driven organ, distinctly audible four leagues away, regulates every aspect of the daily life of the inhabitants by “telephony,” that is, by the organ’s “aural telegraph.” If we put the steam-driven organ and the steel house together the result is a satire on the resonant architecture that fascinated the utopian imagination. One model that Euphonia mocks is the “new city” of the Saint-Simonians.\textsuperscript{44} At the center of this ideal city, as imagined by the religious community led by Father Enfantin at Ménilmontant outside Paris, stands the Temple-Woman (homage to the awaited female messiah). Conceived as the meeting place of heaven and earth, the universe and man, the temple provides the setting for the ultimate spectacle. The temple’s organ, situated between the metal plates of the girdle, pours forth a cascade of sound from the mouth, eyes, and ears of the Temple-Woman. Precast iron construction will enable the pillars of the building to act as organ pipes, transforming the entire temple into a “roaring orchestra.” The Saint-Simonian Michel Chevalier anticipates the most magnificent effects, galvanic, chemical, and mechanical, that will come from the assembly of different metals and “the action of a central fire serving the ceremonies”:

A Temple of Volta, a temple built by colossal Lovers, a temple of melody and harmony, a temple whose mechanism will send forth at given moments floods of heat and light… The life of the earth manifested in its mystery by magnetism and electricity, in its splendour by the brilliance of metals and tissues, by wondrous cascades, by a splendid vegetation visible through the windows of the temple. Solar life manifested by heat and light. Human life manifested by music, by all the arts, by the profusion of paintings, of sculptures, by panoramas and dioramas which will unite in a single point all of space and all of time! What an immense communion! What a glorification of God, of his Messiah and of Humanity!\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} Brzoska, \textit{Die Idee des Gesamtkunstwerks}, 190, 193.
\textsuperscript{44} Charles Duveyrier, \textit{La ville nouvelle ou Le Paris des Saint-Simoniens} (Paris, 1832). For the following, see Bénichou, \textit{Le temps des prophètes}, 301–5.
Chevalier’s fantasies illustrate, in Bénichou’s words, the Ménilmontant community’s “dream of a theatre of communion, a spiritually and cosmically expanded version of the Public Festival.”

Thus Émile Barrault envisages a temple, larger than the ancient circus, in which the new drama will be born, joining the past and the future through the union of all the arts. Barrault even expected the universe to collaborate through the appearance of a comet or through a display of the aurora borealis. The utopian-visionary architect Bruno Taut, who was also enthused by the prospect of cosmic effects (see chapter 7), cannot resist the idea of the resonating temple. He envisaged in 1920 such a temple as a Great Star, in which the organ pipes traverse the walls to make the whole building sound like a bell while the walls of glass glow from inside. Just as architecture dissolves into son et lumière, so art, itself dissolving, will permeate everything.

The image of the organ-temple is not confined to utopia alone. Camille Saint-Saëns was prompted to the same simile by a performance of Berlioz’s *Grand messe des morts*:

> His [Berlioz’s] aim was to create a huge three-dimensional block of sound in which the contemplative soul might lose itself in wonder and humility, an all-consuming apocalyptic musical equivalent of the Last Judgment. It was the kind of musical experience no one had dreamed of before. Saint-Saëns seems to have grasped the nature of the acoustical idea when he said: “It seemed as if each separate slim column of each pillar in the church became an organ pipe and the whole edifice a vast organ.”

Ancients and Moderns: Wagner

The centrality of Wagner to the history and the idea of the total work of art is twofold: his theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* forms the central directing inspiration of his music dramas; his manifestos *Art and Revolution* (1849) and *The Artwork of the Future* (1849) fuse in the heat of revolutionary fervor the various anticipations since the French Revolution of the artwork to come into a powerful vision of the regeneration of man, society, and art. Beyond that, however, Wagner’s aesthetic conception of politics complements Rousseau’s political conception of art. Although it is clear that this complementarity reflects the historical distance that separates the *Social Contract* and *Art and Revolution* as well as the opposing Greek

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49. The term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as opposed to what it signifies, is not prominent in Wagner’s writings, for all that he coined the term. It is confined to the writings arising from the 1848–49 revolutions. For his own work Wagner used the term *Musikdrama* (music drama) and then *Bühnenfestspiel* (stage festival play).
sources of their respective utopias—Sparta for Rousseau as opposed to Athens for Wagner—there is nevertheless a deep structural similarity in their accounts of the foundation and the refoundation of society. To Rousseau’s passage from the state of nature to the civil state, which founds society, corresponds Wagner’s revolutionary passage from the existing, unnatural political state to the free association of natural universal humanity beyond the state. To Rousseau’s institution of the social contract, through “the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community” (Social Contract 1.6), corresponds the redemptive act of self-sacrifice through which egoistic man accedes to his communal human essence; to the one and indivisible republic corresponds the “unique, and indivisible and greatest artwork.” To Rousseau’s grounding of politics in the sovereignty of the people corresponds Wagner’s grounding of art in the creativity of the people. These structural correspondences derive from the common figure of “total alienation,” which Wagner generalizes into a comprehensive theory of redemption that springs, as in Rousseau, from a complete negation of existing society—its politics, its commerce, its social relations of oppression, its art. The whole thrust of Wagner’s revolutionary radicalism lies in the rejection of political and aesthetic differentiation in the name of a once and future totality, in and through which alone true differentiation will be possible.

To understand Wagner’s theory of redemption, which amounts to nothing less than the redemption of and from history, we must begin with his critical reading of the history of the West as a history of decadence. By raising fifth-century Athens to the unsurpassed model of his political-aesthetic utopia, Wagner directly challenged the modern conception of history as progress. Although, like Rousseau, Wagner distinguishes between Christ and his church—Art and Revolution ends with the dedication of the “altar of the future” to the twin deities of the religion of equality and beauty, Jesus and Apollo—his hostility to Christianity is such that, of Saint-Simon’s progressive alternation of organic and critical epochs, he allows only the first organic epoch, that of the Greek city-states up to Socrates. The usurpation of art and religion by Greek philosophy already announces the critical moment of decline. Wagner identifies the moment of decline as the sundering of the unity of art, religion, and politics in the polis. This dismembering is inherent in the progression from the traditional temple ceremonies to the religious ceremony-become-artwork in the shape of tragedy. In going beyond the veil of religion to reveal the naked human being, art (i.e., Euripides and Aristophanes) destroyed the communal bond of religion and with it the communal artwork. Religion withdrew, abandoning political life to egoistic,
absolute, singular man (3: 132–33).51 The most important source for Wagner’s conception of Greek drama was Johann Gustav Droysen’s translation of the plays of Aeschylus, published in 1832, and republished in 1842. “This was the version that revealed the power of the Oresteia to Wagner: thanks to Droysen, Wagner became the first German Hellenist to see Aeschylus’ surviving trilogy as the central Greek achievement in drama.”52 Droysen presents the Greek art religion (the drama as the sacrament in which the gods take on human form) as the antithesis of contemporary drama.53

For Wagner, and for Nietzsche in turn, the eclipse of the Athenian state marked not one turning point in the history of the West but the decisive turning point. The logic of such a theory of decadence was to extend the critical epoch of “enlightenment” backward beyond the eighteenth century, beyond the Reformation and Renaissance, to embrace the two thousand years of “discontented thought” since the downfall of Athenian tragedy (3: 13). It was also to proclaim with Ludwig Feuerbach (to whom The Artwork of the Future is dedicated in “grateful admiration”) the end of (Hegelian) philosophy, that is, philosophy’s coming redemption in human emancipation, crowned by the unitary work of art. Wagner’s philosophy of history operates with the familiar triadic pattern of unity, unity lost, and unity regained: the once and future unitary artwork of the polis frames the two thousand years of the enslavement of man in the political state.54 Athens represents the unsurpassed, perhaps unsurpassable model, against which Wagner measures all of history. It is both a real historical example and an ideal image: real in that Wagner can point to the invention and institution of democratic self-determination; ideal in that Wagner can read into the beautiful synthesis of art and religion in the festival drama his own aesthetic meta-politics, which makes Athenian tragedy the higher truth of public action and the true source of communal identity:

This people streamed together from the political forum, from the law courts, from the countryside, from the ships, from the military camp, from the furthest regions, filled to thirty thousand the amphitheatre, in order to see performed the deepest of all tragedies, Prometheus, in order to gather themselves, to comprehend their own activities, to fuse with their being, their fellowship, their god in the most inward unity

51. All quotations from Richard Wagner, Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen, ed. Wolfgang Golther (Berlin: Bong, 1913), vol. 3.
53. Droysen’s goal in translating Aeschylus and Aristophanes was to contribute to the revival of Greek classical art by stimulating contemporary artists, and in particular by providing words for the music of his friend Felix Mendelssohn, who wrote the music for a production of Antigone in Berlin in 1842. A. D. Momigliano, Studies on Modern Scholarship (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 152–53.
54. The most systematic account of the political dimension of Wagner’s “political-aesthetic utopia” is Udo Bermbach, Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks: Richard Wagners politische-ästhetische Utopie (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994).
and thus to become again in the noblest and deepest tranquillity what they had been in the most restless agitation and most separate individuality only a few hours earlier. (3: 11)

Wagner makes it clear that separate social activities (politics, justice, agriculture, trade, warfare) and separate individualities find their reconciliation in the aesthetic public sphere. This reconciliation presupposes the essential link between a free people and a free art, whereby true art becomes the expression of the highest freedom (3: 13)—that is to say, art replaces politics as the highest activity of man. The downfall of the Athenian state thus sets in train a dual history of dissolution and disintegration: “Just as the communal spirit split into a thousand egoistic tendencies, so the great unitary artwork of tragedy dissolved into its individual constituent parts” (3: 12). This history of unity lost, constructed in the image of a free people and its free art, constitutes Wagner’s “social myth.”

By the same token it encloses him in the fatal circle of reciprocal causality: how can there be a free art without a free people, a free people without a free art? This inescapable conundrum, intrinsic to the very idea of the artwork of the future and to Wagner’s identification of art and revolution, recurs in a variety of registers: Will the people or will the lonely artist be the creator of the redemptive-revolutionary artwork? Is the lonely artist the voice of the people, the creator or the midwife of its life-giving myth? Is a free society or the subsidization of the theatre the precondition of a free art? More acutely, is aesthetic illusion the means to or the substitute for the total revolution in feeling demanded by Schiller and Wagner? The Ring of the Nibelungs, originally conceived in 1848 as the tragedy that will crown the revolution and bring to full consciousness the overthrow of the old world, ends by postponing the advent of a liberated humanity to an unknown future.

The artwork of the future thus remains true to its title. Its redemptive telos is tied to its critical function as political-aesthetic vanguard in and against a world of alienation. In this sense the artwork of the future is its own precursor in

56. Thus Wagner’s question: “How can man hope to become free and independent before he can exercise his noblest activity, the artistic?” (3: 33).
57. The people is the inventor of language, religion, and democracy (3: 53); “the lonely artistic spirit striving for redemption in nature cannot create the artwork of the future” (3: 61). The artist of the future will be the people (3: 169).
58. The theatre needs public subsidies in order to be able to show the transformation of the slaves of industry into beautiful, self-conscious human beings (3: 39).
59. Wagner demands for the artwork of the future complete stage illusion through the cooperation of landscape painting and all the means of optical effects through lighting (3: 153), which Alphonse Appia was the first to deliver through electric lighting. The electrical illumination of the Grail chalice at the premiere of Parsifal in Bayreuth in 1882 was thus a token of the new technical possibilities of stage illusion. See Matthew Wilson Smith, “Knights of the Electric Chalice,” in The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace (New York: Routledge, 2007), 39–46.
that it exists in the double form of theory and practice: the trilogy of the Zurich writings—Art and Revolution, The Artwork of the Future, and Opera and Drama (1851)—precedes, explains, and justifies the Ring tetralogy. Even though Wagner envisaged the reconciliation of knowledge and life in the artwork to come, his own unique combination of theory and practice indicates not only that the path to redemption must pass through critical negation but also that the idea of redemption provides the key to the whole argument of The Artwork of the Future. The act of redemption accomplishes the passage from egoism to communism (Feuerbach). Redemptive entry into the totality demands total sacrifice. What is sacrificed is the false individualization of self-interest, whether it be capitalist greed or art for art’s sake. Modern art is thus nothing but the reflection of industrial society, the last stage of the whole epoch of absolute egoism. Here Wagner is particularly close to Marx’s theory of alienation in the (unpublished) “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” of 1844, where each social sphere is conceived as a particular alienation of man’s activities. Wagner asserts even more emphatically than Hegel the end of art in modernity. Having lost all connection with public life and the people, art has become the private possession and purely narcissistic practice of an artistic class in the service of the market. In Opera and Drama, Wagner clears the stage for the artwork of the future by reconstructing the already completed history of opera and drama as the divided halves of the once and future unitary artwork.

Wagner’s concept of total redemption entails a cyclical philosophy of history, stretching from the downfall of the natural Greek polity to the completion of history in the communist society of the future. The analogy of politics and art means that The Ring presents the act of sacrificial redemption on the level of both content and form. It is precisely this double dimension that defines authentic drama as the highest form of art: the universal human art of the future will be the bearer of the universal religion of the future. As befits the religion of man, The Ring, inspired by Feuerbach, depicts the redemption of theology in anthropology, that is, the end of the gods in human consciousness. The dying god Wotan is complemented by the heroes, Siegfried and Brünnhilde, whose sacrificial deaths testify to the truth and necessity they embody. Wagner can thus define the tragic hero in Feuerbachian fashion as communist, that is, the individual who through his self-sacrifice merges with the collectivity out of inner, free necessity (3: 166). “The commemoration of such a death is the worthiest that men can celebrate” (3: 164).

Such a commemoration both presupposes and produces the unity and identity of a free people through its communion with itself and its god. Wagner fuses the idea of the French revolutionary festival and the German idea of tragedy in the artwork of the future,60 which exemplifies at the same time on the level of form the redemptive return to unity, for it is only in the drama that the individual arts

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can unfold their highest potential. Aesthetic redemption in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is comprehended as an act of loving self-sacrifice that mirrors the truth and necessity of the tragic action. In and through this sacrificial act the arts find their freedom as *art* in the dramatic union of the three purely human art forms: dance, music, and poetry—the language of the body, the language of the heart, and the language of the spirit. Opera, by contrast, is dismissed by Wagner as nothing but the occasion for displaying the egoistic rivalry of the three sister arts (3: 119). United, however, dance, music, and poetry draw the other—plastic—arts into their redemptive orbit: “Not a single richly developed capacity of the individual arts will remain unused in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the future” (3: 156). The statue is brought to life in the dance; the colored shadows of painting, whether of the human figure or of historical scenes, will give way to the depiction of nature as the setting for the dramatic action; architecture, enriched by sculpture and painting, will attain its true destiny in building the theatre of art,61 the temple of the people without class distinctions. And perhaps the most important dimension of the Wagnerian synthesis, the introduction of the musical language of Beethoven into the drama through the orchestra: the living body of harmony, which immerses audience and dramatic action in the sea of shared feeling. This endless emotional surge finds its redemption in the poetic word, just as the poetic intention is simultaneously extinguished and realized in the living stage presentation (3: 156).

At each stage of the argument we observe the same fundamental pattern—critique, sacrifice, redemption—that defines the projected historical sequence from egoism to communism and makes Wagner the prophet of the downfall of the political state and the inheritor and liquidator of the existing arts, the creator who is called to enter into the legacy of Shakespeare and Beethoven. The two faces of redemptive sublation—inheritance and annihilation—are evident in Wagner’s treatment of absolute music and absolute literature. Beethoven, the hero of absolute music, forged the artistic key to the artwork of the future through music’s self-redemptive embrace of the poetic word in his last symphony. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is therefore *the* last symphony, marking the self-extinguishing limit of absolute music and its redemption into the realm of universal art, the universal drama to come (3: 96–97). Separated from the drama, the poetic word has been reduced to a mere written shadow. Literature has yet to embrace its inescapable *self-annihilation*, that is to say, its absorption into life, into the living artwork of the future (3: 116).

If we step back a moment from Wagner’s relentless deduction of the world-historical artwork to come, we can see that the threefold task of critique, sacrifice, and redemption, directed to separating the art of the future from the alienated art,

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the culture industry of the present, amounts to an emphatic theory of the avant-garde. On the one hand, Wagner endows the vanguard function of art and the artist with a revolutionary-redemptive telos. On the other hand, he already reveals what we might call the total ambivalence of this telos as it will be played out in the avant-garde movements of the first third of the twentieth century. This ambivalence is spelled out in the fate of literature: its self-annihilation is described as the redemptive absorption into life, into the living artwork of the future. The transformation of the “egoistic,” aesthetically differentiated arts can and perhaps must be construed indifferently as the redemption of art into life or of life into art. The extremes meet: the self-sacrifice of aesthetic art coincides with the dream of the total work of art. When these two inseparable aspects of the redemption of art in Wagner’s theory of the artwork of the future are separated, it necessarily entails the distinction between the absolute and the total work of art. Thus the avant-garde has come to be identified with the progressive—that is, self-destructive, self-purifying—pursuit of the absolute, flanked on the right by futurism’s and on the left by Dada and surrealism’s declaration of war on the “institution of art.” The progressive constructions of aesthetic modernism have completely overshadowed the other, complementary quest of the avant-garde for the total work of art. Marcella Lista interprets the absolute work of art and the total work of art as two versions of the same totalizing impulse: the idea of the total work oscillated between “the utopia of a unique, absolute language, capable of containing everything, and the aspiration to a concrete synthesis of the arts, united in a monumental form.”

62. The analogy between art and politics also brings Wagner’s theory of the avant-garde close to the Leninist conception of the vanguard party, which raises to consciousness the revolutionary need of the proletariat, just as Wagner claims the task of the artist of the future is to raise the spontaneous, unconscious needs of the people to consciousness in the artwork of the future.
